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The New Guard

From Call of Duty to Assassin's Creed, the holiday season is often propped up on the shoulders of gaming giants. This year will be no different. Sequels to these juggernaut franchises arrive in November with Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War and Assassin's Creed Valhalla. Fans always expect big things from these series, but in this particular year, Sony and Microsoft need them to shine a little brighter for the respective launches of PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X.

When I think of a new era of gaming, my mind immediately wants something different, not more sequels, even though they may be enhanced. I'm sure I'll play the hell out of both of the aforementioned titles, but I know what to expect from them, and when I boot up my new consoles, I want to see something I haven't before.

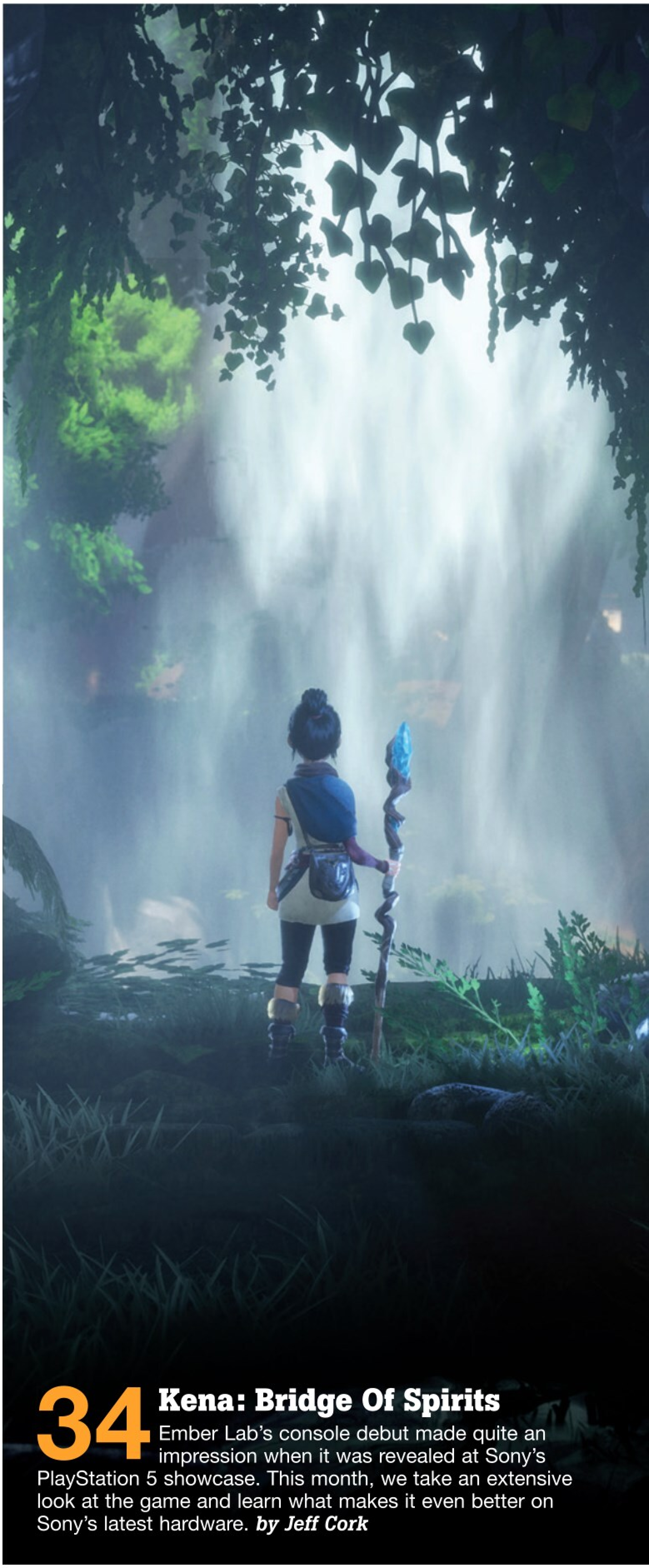
Enter Kena: Bridge of Spirits, a game that turned heads when it was announced alongside Horizon Forbidden West and Spider-Man: Miles Morales. Kena is beautiful, charming, unique, and is something we'll be able to play this year on PlayStation 5. It has all of the makings of becoming another huge series in gaming, and yet, it's made by a small development team named Ember Lab that just happens to be working on its first game.

For this month's cover story, we bring you Ember Lab's story, and also take a deep dive into Kena, which we saw played on PlayStation 5. As we explore Kena's gorgeous landscapes, and get to know the mysterious beings known as the Rot, we tell you about the PlayStation 5 controller, the system's lightning-quick load times, and also give you a good idea of what you can expect from games that will straddle two generations (the changes are bigger than you would think).

If you aren't ready for what comes next, this issue also celebrates the games you can play now with *Game Informer*'s top picks and awards for the current generation. Which games defined the PlayStation 4 and Xbox One era? Read on to find out.

Enjoy the issue, folks.

Be safe. Be happy. And game on!



34 **Kena: Bridge Of Spirits**

Ember Lab's console debut made quite an impression when it was revealed at Sony's PlayStation 5 showcase. This month, we take an extensive look at the game and learn what makes it even better on Sony's latest hardware. ***by Jeff Cork***

10 Best Of The Generation

We highlight the defining games of the last generation, selecting the must-play projects from recent years.

18 Laurels & Legacies

Games can shape the hobby in different ways, even if they aren't the best of the best. Explore our individual awards for the titles that influenced the current console era.

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The lead creative voice behind Ghost of Tsushima talks samurai cinema and what got him into gaming.

26 Competing In The Pandemic

Overwatch pro Dusttin Bowerman shares his take on competitive play in these unprecedented times.

27 The Wonderful Wisdom Of Jennifer Hale

The video game voice-acting superstar sits down to share her take on a career that spans over 100 roles.

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We talk to Stardew Valley creator Eric Barone about the game's continuing success.

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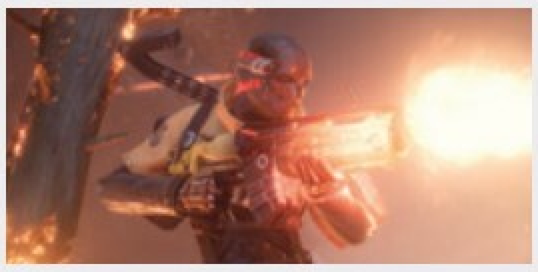
48 Call Of Duty: Black Ops Cold War

At long last, we get our first in-depth look at Treyarch's newest franchise entry, with an early glimpse into a campaign of covert operatives and dark secrets.

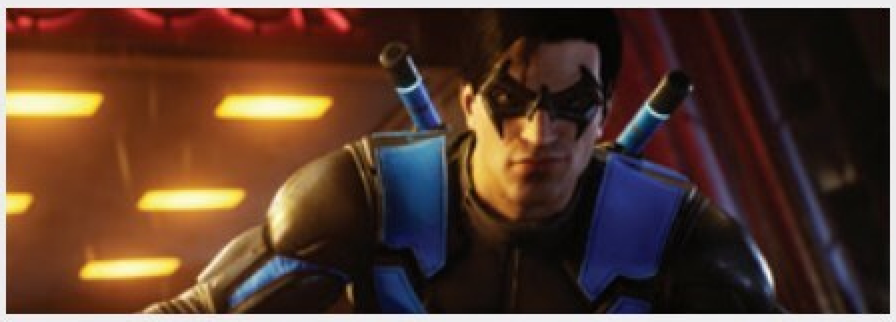
52 Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time

Picking up where the original trilogy left off decades ago, the new Crash Bandicoot keeps players on their toes with a variety of game-changing masks.



56 **Outriders** We go hands-on with the upcoming third-person shooter, and see how much damage we can do in cooperative multiplayer.

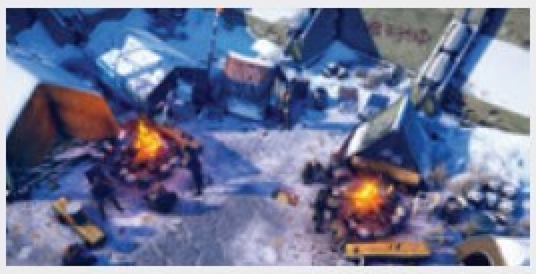
58 **Griftlands** Klei's latest stylish game takes deckbuilding to new heights, integrating story and narrative into a tightly balanced card game of combat and negotiation.



60 **Gotham Knights** Batman is dead, but Gotham still needs crime-fighters. Batgirl, Nightwing, Red Hood, and Robin must step up in this new cooperative action/RPG from WB Games Montreal.

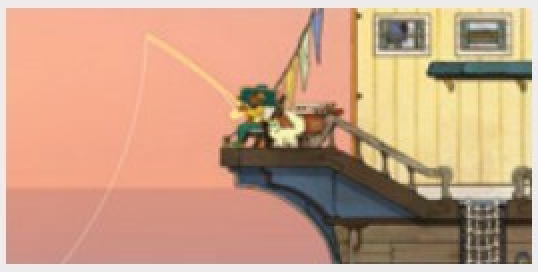
61 **Ghostwire: Tokyo** The makers of The Evil Within are prepping a twisted new adventure on the streets of Tokyo, and we spoke with director Kenji Kimura for the full scoop.

66 **Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes** The spiritual successor to the Suikoden series attracted a wave of enthusiasm during its crowd-funding drive, and we got a first look at the new project.



73 **Wasteland 3** Developer inXile transports players to post-apocalyptic Colorado for a rich CRPG filled with choice and consequences.

76 **Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout** Who could have guessed that playing a tiny bean on an obstacle course could be this much fun? The multiplayer mayhem of this accessible game has taken the world by storm. Check out our enthusiastic review.



77 **Spiritfarer** Beautiful but bittersweet, the new game from Thunder Lotus helps you usher spirits on their path to the afterlife.

80 **UFC 4** The new entry comes out swinging with smart evolutions for the hard-hitting franchise.

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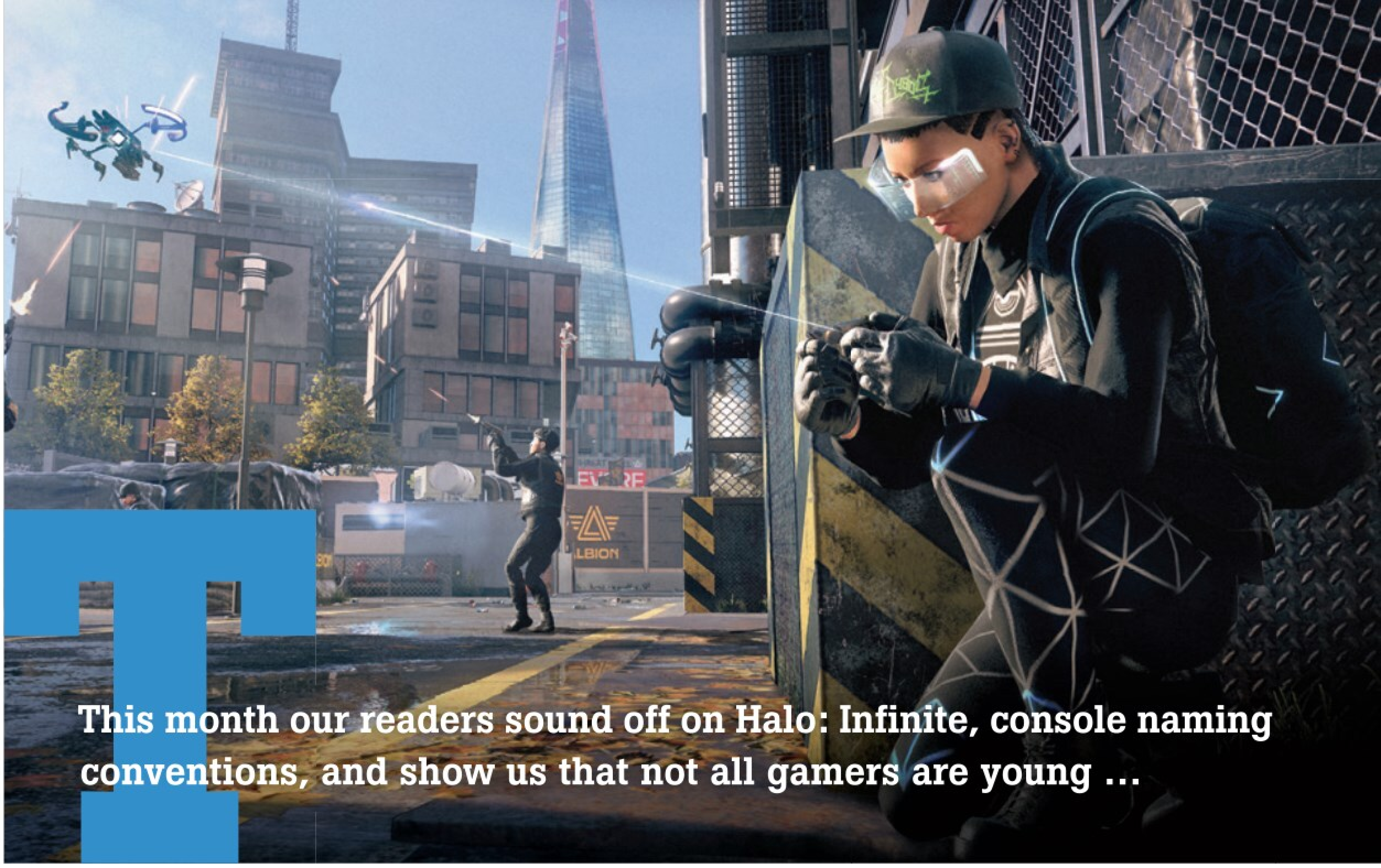
feedback



This month our readers sound off on Halo: Infinite, console naming conventions, and show us that not all gamers are young …

Watch Dogs: Legion

Thanks for giving me an idea of what it will be like to play as any NPC in Watch Dogs: Legion. I had my doubts about how fulfilling that idea would be, but it sounds much deeper and more involved than I thought. I'm going to try to play the entire game as a grandpa. I'm a 65-year-old grandpa myself, and we aren't represented well in games at all. Here's my chance to show the world we still have gaming chops!

Devin Ambuehl
Chicago, IL

Most people view the Watch Dogs series as open world, but it could also be viewed as science fiction. Not all sci-fi games need to be set on distant worlds or use laser guns. Sci-fi can be about near-future ideas and Watch Dogs does a great job of showing us how dangerous our technology could be if it were just a little more advanced. Loved the article you wrote and I'll be playing it on day one!

Amenda Qorsho
Middleton Corners, NH

Ubisoft doesn't get enough credit for how thoroughly it combs the world for interesting gaming locations. Assassin's Creed explores places we rarely see, Far Cry is in the same boat, and Watch Dogs also gives us a nice flavor of "new" for its open-world settings. I know San Francisco and London are old hat in games, but the way they are used is distinct. Going into London in the near future in Watch Dogs looks like a great place to explore. I can't wait!

Denny "DeadSec" MacNaughton
via email

Console Names

I've been a loyal Xbox player since 2001, and I love most things Microsoft does. Game Pass is the best new idea in a long time. The one thing I disagree with Microsoft on is the naming of its consoles. Why not just number them in order like Sony does with PlayStation, or at least give them new names. Xbox One X is the high-end model of this generation, but Xbox Series X is the base model of the next generation? Not only is the doubling of 'X' a bit confusing, but changing the meaning is odd. Is that what's happening here?

Jennifer Loefler
Cincinnati, OH

We fully agree that Microsoft has made its console names overly-confusing. Naming the third-generation machine Xbox One was a headscratcher at the time, and the confusion has only gotten worse as the next gen approaches. That said, we will get used to these names. We always do. In the case of Xbox Series X, the codename Xbox Scarlett may have been better.

Contact Us

Send your questions, comments, and rants to feedback@gameinformer.com for a chance to be featured in the magazine!

Tutorials

What tutorial left you feeling satisfied and confident in not only the gameplay but what you'll come to expect for the rest of the game?

Tim Turi (probably)
via gameinformer.com

The best tutorials are spread across the experience and don't bog down the opening moments of gameplay. God of War does a great job of teaching you just enough in a particular moment to set you up for what is coming next. First-person shooters often deliver cookie-cutter tutorials. We've all likely done the "look up, look down, crouch, now jump" sequence more than we care to admit.

Easier Playthroughs

Why is it that game developers don't have difficulty settings or let you save when you want to? I'm a 72-year-old gamer and have been trying to play Control. I love the game and the idea, but let's face it: I don't have the skills of an 18-year old. At least put checkpoints in the game. I get so frustrated when you battle your way well into an area and die then have to start the whole thing over again. The Division was the same way. How about manual saves for us old guys?

Mike
Plainfield, IL

This is the second letter we printed this month from an older gamer, and we received far more. Video games shed the "just toys for kids" label long ago, but are just now focusing heavily on accessibility to open the doors to more players. You'll be happy to hear that Control just added an Assist mode that adds in new soft checkpoints, allows you to change the damage input and output, and even turns off death entirely.

Continuing To Game

I am a practicing physician in Orange County, California, and my absolute favorite game to play is Destiny, PvP mode. I used to have a lot more time to play. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic I've been deployed to the frontlines, and I now have precious little time to game. However, every minute that I have free, that is not spent either in the emergency room or in a clinic, I try to game with my children to preserve my sanity. I would absolutely love to be featured in *Game Informer* magazine if allowed the privilege. I think this would be helpful in proving that if a middle-aged, busy, professional woman can be a gamer, then everyone can engage in gaming for incredible stress relief and harmless fun. I wish you, your family, and the entire team at your magazine a safe and healthy journey through this pandemic.

Please believe the words of a professional who is in close proximity to COVID-positive patients almost every single day: Together we will overcome and get through these times!

With utmost respect,
Michele Amirkhan MD
via email

Thank you so much for all you are doing to keep people healthy during this trying time. We hope you and your family are safe, and that seeing your name in the magazine brings about a smile, and perhaps even some exotic drops in Destiny!

Short Answers To Readers' Burning Questions:

With the PS5 and Series X launching in just a few months, I wanted to know what was everyone's first console they ever bought at launch?

We all have different starting points, but many of us at GI began with NES or Atari 2600. The first game featured on a Game Informer cover was Sonic the Hedgehog for Sega Genesis.

My favorite game growing up was Battletoads. My least favorite game this year is Battletoads.

The past is sometimes best left buried. We had high hopes for Battletoads' return, but were also let down by the direction the new game went in.

Do you think Microsoft will make a VR headset for Xbox Series X?

Microsoft could create its own headset, but we could also see the company partnering with an existing platform like Oculus to bring VR to Xbox Series X.

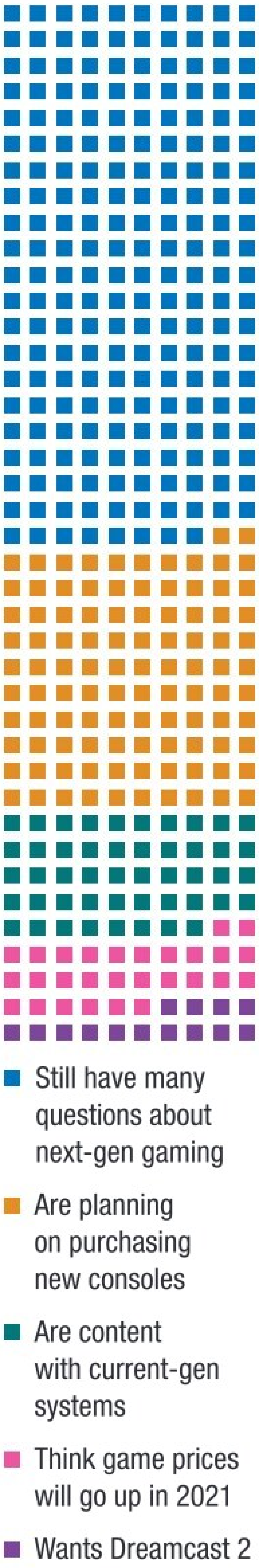
Best Comment:

"The only new console I will ever buy is Dreamcast 2!"

Question Of The Month:

What is your greatest accomplishment in a game?

On Your Mind



The Next Big Thing

The upcoming console generation is making us think about the future of gaming. What do you think will be the next revolution in how we interact with games? I think games will transition from screens to the outdoors whenever AR tech has developed enough.

Vander Kill
Denver, CO

Virtual reality is still in its infancy and headsets remain big and clunky, but this gaming medium is evolving fast and will likely be a bigger part of this next generation. If VR tech can be streamlined down to fit into a headset that looks like a thin pair of glasses without a cable, we could see it taking off.

Halo Infinite

Even after all the backlash about visuals, I trust 343 enough to turn things around and release something special in Halo Infinite. It's just too ambitious of a game to not be interested in for a long-time Halo fan like myself, especially since so much is riding on its success. If this latest adventure about blasting aliens on a unique planet doesn't impress, Halo can't easily survive.

AnAttackCorgi
Vancouver, BC

We all wanted Halo Infinite to lead Xbox players into the future as a Series X launch title, but more than that, we want another great Halo game, and 343 Industries is being given the time to make that happen. We thought the gameplay that was shown looked promising, and can't wait to see what it's like to explore a much larger world as Master Chief. The only big downside to the delay is no release timeframe other than 2021. Does that mean it could be spring? Next holiday? We wish we had more guidance on how long the delay is.

Next-Gen Excitement

Last month we asked our readers which next-generation game they are most excited to play. Here are some of their picks …

I'm most excited for Spider-Man: Miles Morales. For me, it's reason enough to get a PS5. The first game is one of my favorite games of all time and I have no doubt this game will be right up there.

DancingPhlower
via gameinformer.com

I think the game I'm looking forward to the most on next year's consoles is Psychonauts 2. It's not technically next-gen (since it was originally planned for Xbox One and PS4), but I'm glad the game will be ported to the latest systems. Even if it was delayed again.

Alyson Matson
via email

One game I'm excited for is TemTem on the PS5. It'll really fill that monster-catching itch that was left unfulfilled after the disappointment that was Pokémon gen 8. Plus it would be nice to finally play co-op with my brother and enjoy a more engaging batting system as well.

Joseph M. Ramos
San Antonio, TX

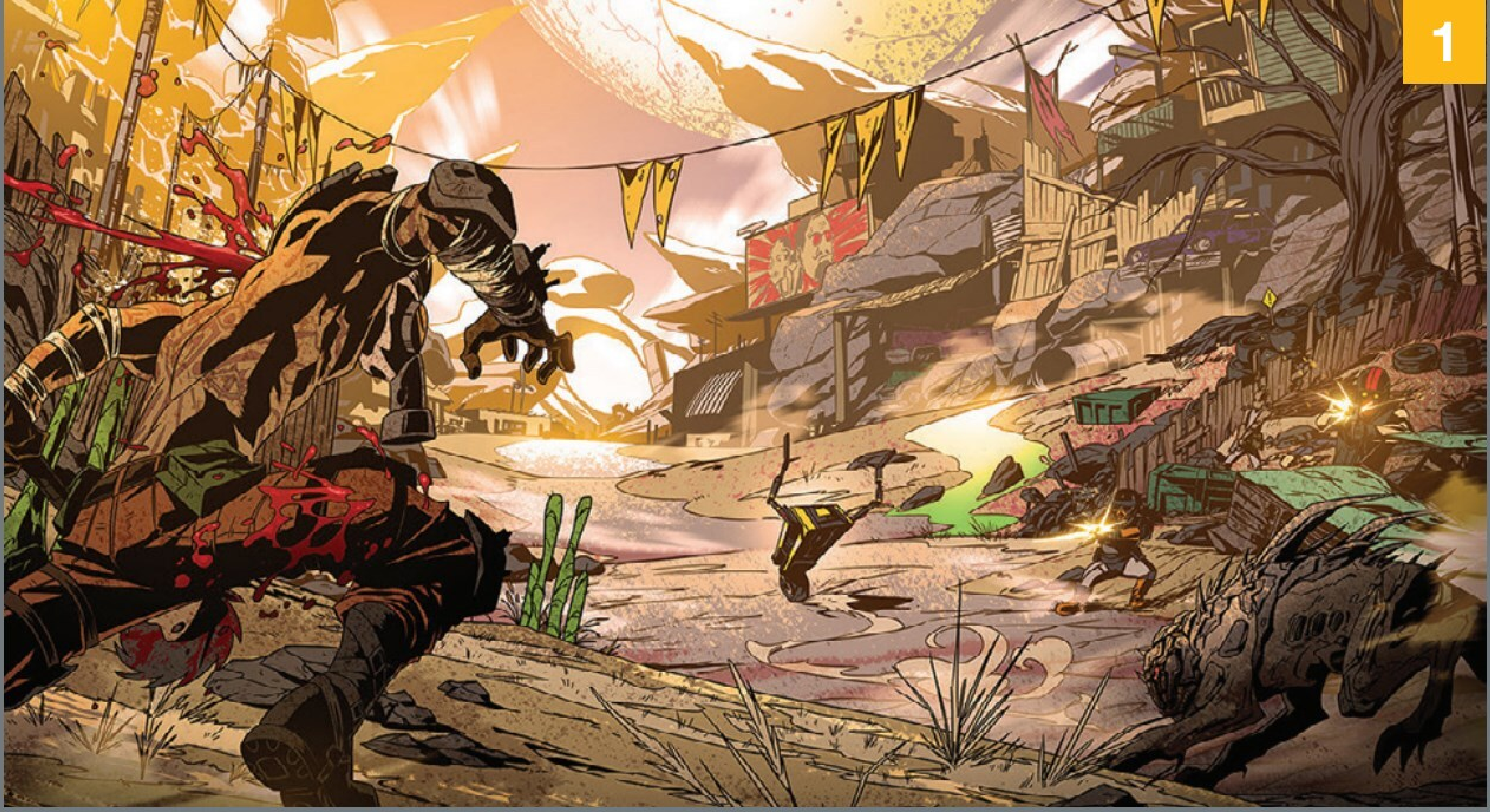
I'm very excited for Skate. I loved the three mainline games, and replayed the trilogy and the DLC earlier this year. The announcement at EA Play was a good tease. I've waited a decade since Skate 3 launched, I can wait a few additional years for more.

Parker Luckenbach
San Diego, CA

Horizon Forbidden West is easily my most anticipated next-gen game. Horizon Zero Dawn did a stupidly fantastic job of laying the foundation for future games while feeling complete in its own right. First runner-up is a tie between Ratchet and Clank: Rift Apart and Spider-Man: Miles Morales.

Drako889
Bluffton, SC

1



WINNER

1 Zach Raw

This is what you call a "quiet, uneventful morning" in Borderlands.

2 Alexander Stapelberg

What do you think the King of All Cosmos' skin feels like: ethereal miasma or vulcanized rubber?

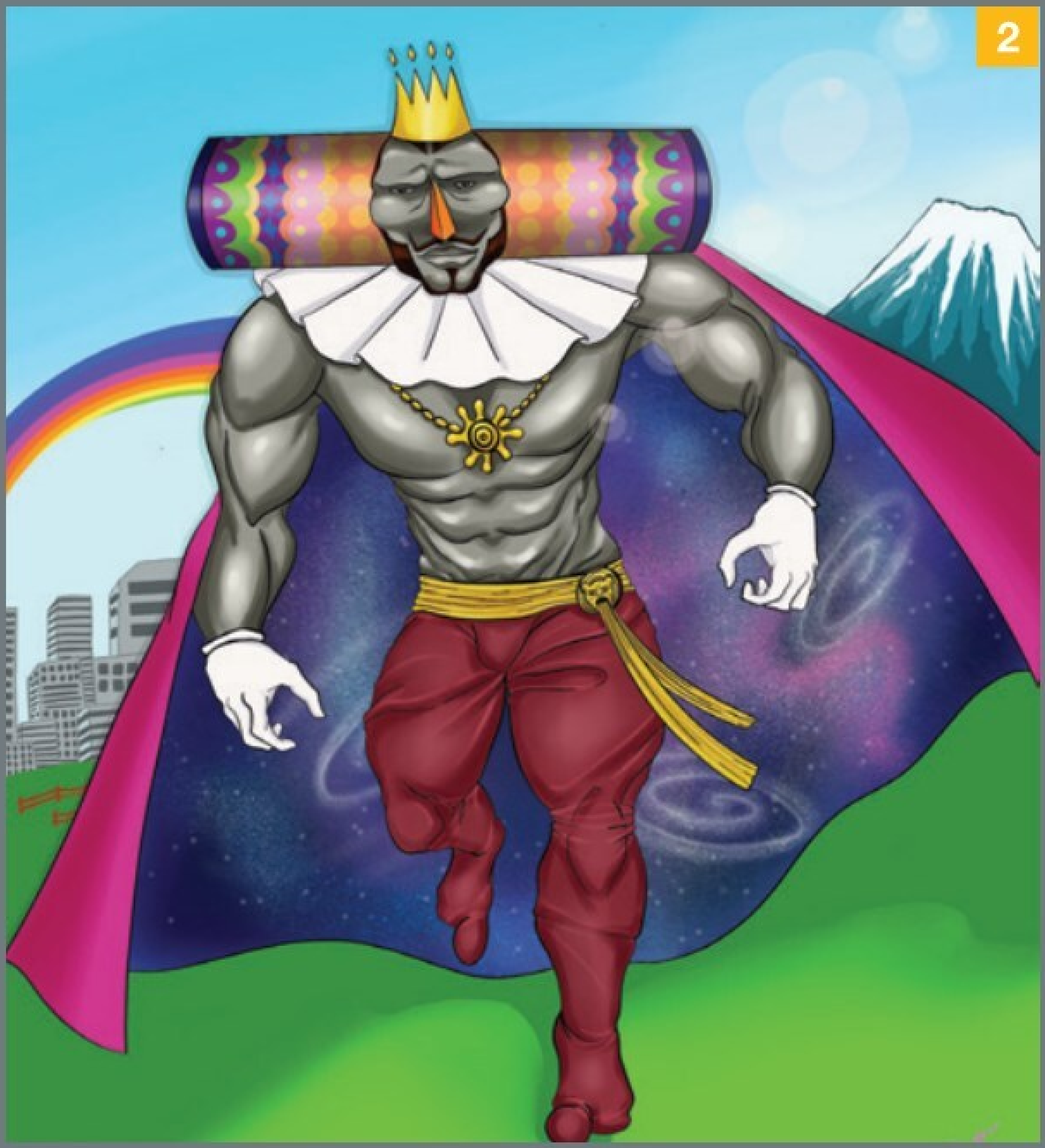
3 Calypsa Coarsey

The door to this nightclub is very small, allowing only the squattest video game characters to enter.

4 Alexa Pena

You can argue about how to pronounce the game's name, but you can't argue that Gris has an inspiring art style worth paying tribute to.

2



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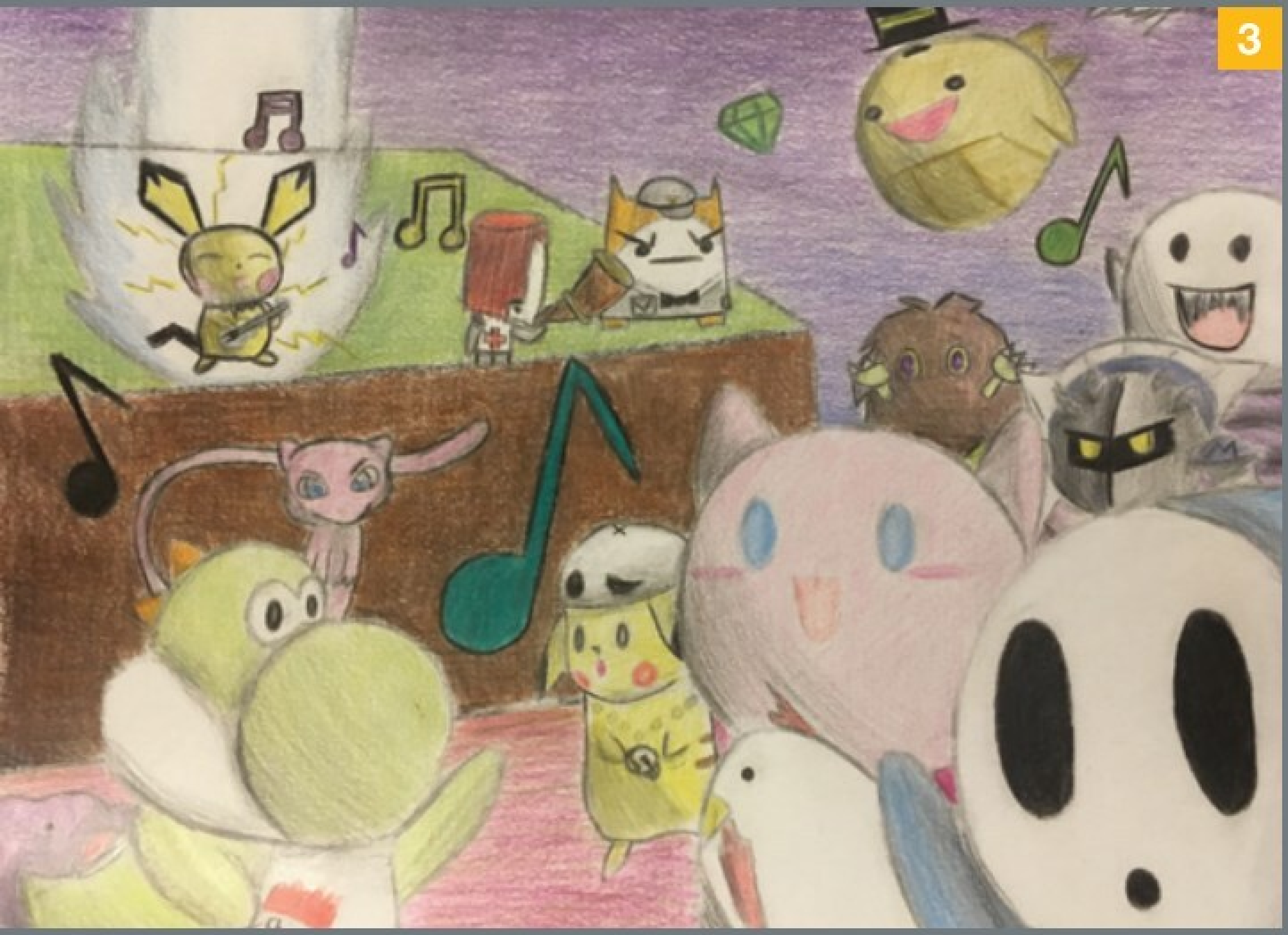

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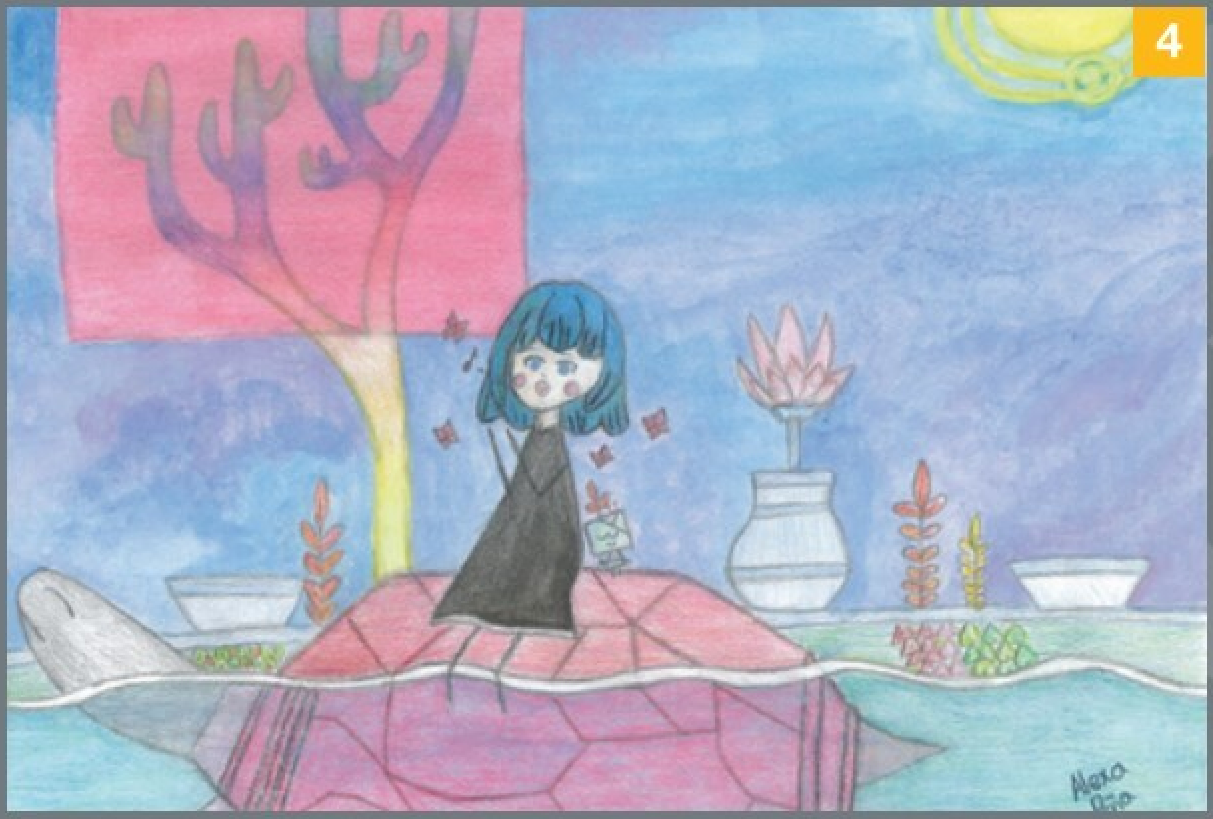

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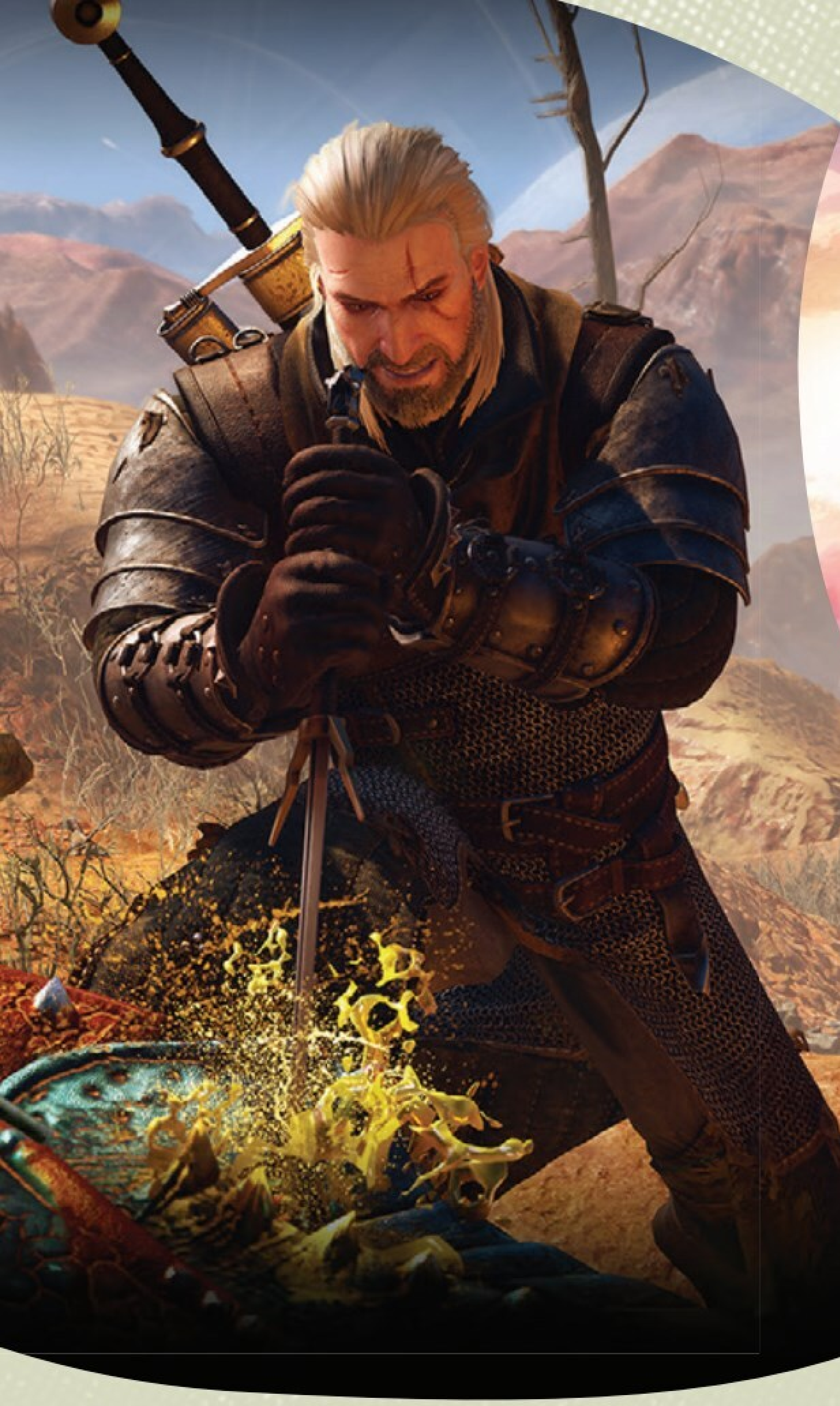
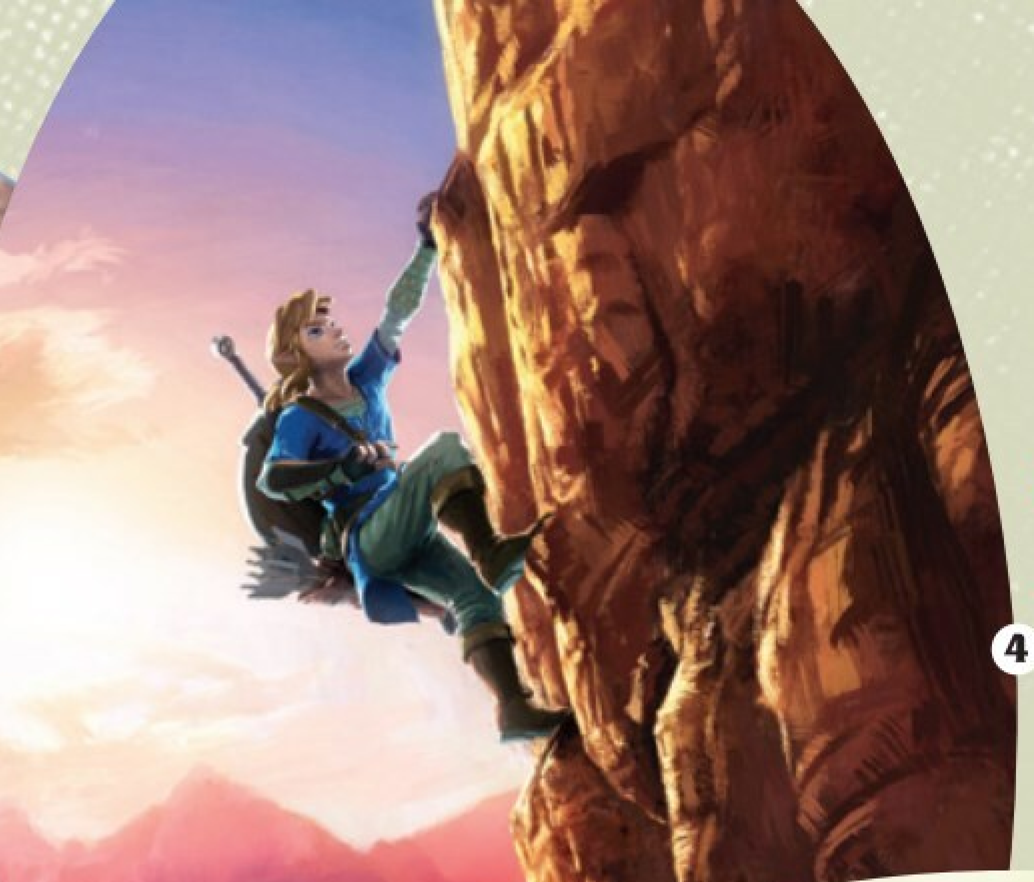
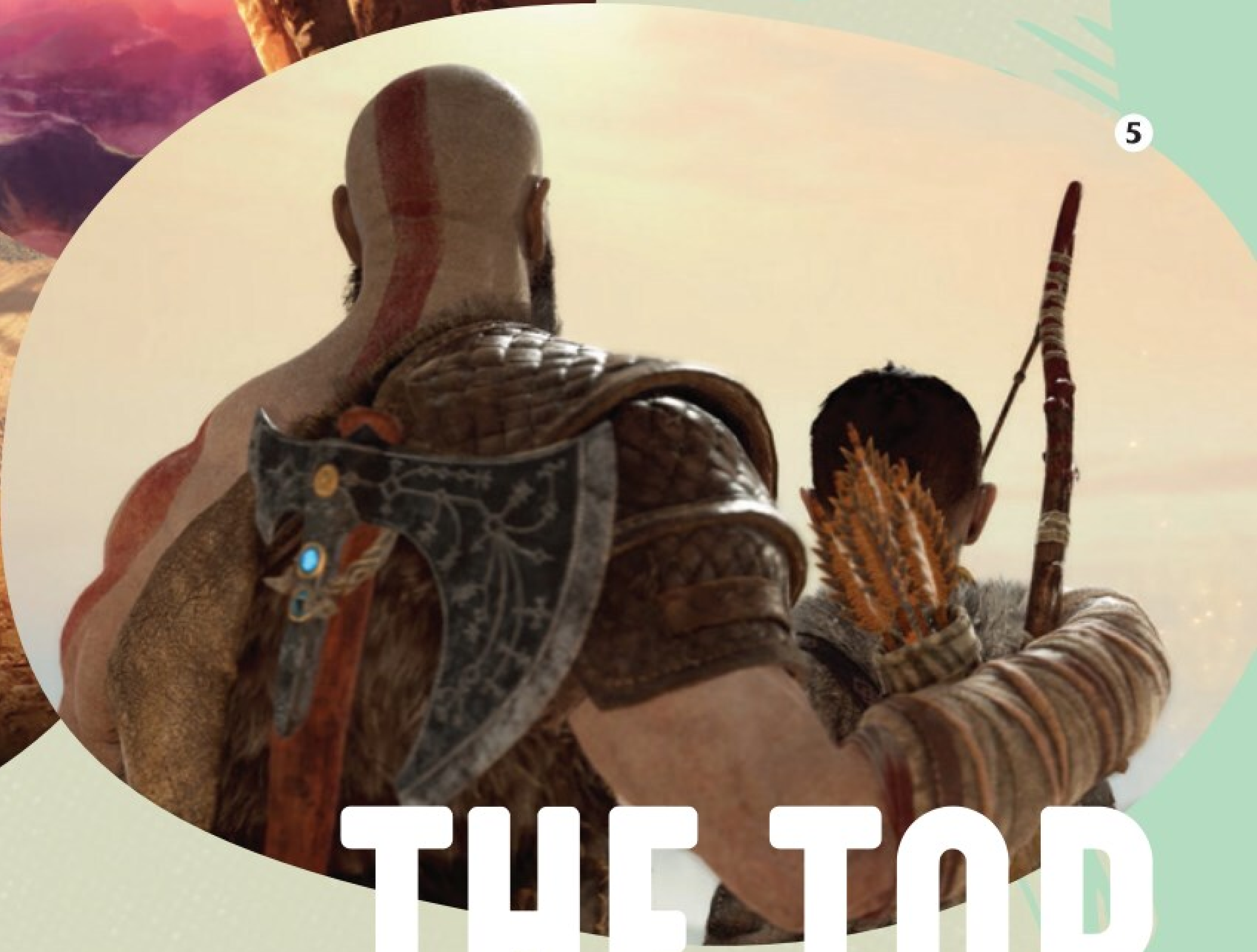
GAMES OF THE GENERATION

The transition to a new console generation gives us many reasons to be excited about the future of gaming. However, as we anticipate what lies ahead, we should also pay our respects to the current-gen games that brought us to this point. After all, the big next-gen releases on the horizon are only possible thanks to the innovations in gameplay, storytelling, and technology that we've seen introduced in recent years.

In the following pages, we celebrate the best of what the current generation had to offer. While it's impossible to call out every great game on PS4, Xbox One, Switch, and PC, we single out the top contenders across various categories and genres. Whether you want to find a hidden gem you missed or just reminisce about your favorites, these are the games that shaped the generation. ***by Joe Juba***







THE TOP TIER

Some games are simply must-plays. They are so groundbreaking and astounding that they rise to the top of the conversation regardless of genre confines. That's what these five games represent; if you want a crash course in what was great about this generation, these are what you need to play. They encapsulate the current height of the craft, with memorable characters, immersive gameplay, and clever approaches to player agency.

God of War continues the story of Kratos, but he isn't the warrior you remember. Transplanted into the world of Norse mythology, the Ghost of Sparta is now raising his son, Atreus, while also reckoning with his own violent deeds. Santa Monica Studio's narrative strikes a more thoughtful and mature tone than previous entries, but retains the stylish gameplay; the adventure is full of intense combat and epic moments, and the star of the show is the Leviathan – a magical axe Kratos can throw and recall at will.

Naughty Dog set such a high bar with The Last of Us, many players felt the game did not need a sequel. However, **The Last of Us Part II** proves that the tale of Joel and Ellie is far from over. It tells a nuanced story of revenge, with fantastic characters and emotional performances that create a cinematic experience. The tense and brutal encounters force players into uncomfortable situations, but the attention to detail in your surroundings make the setting feel grounded and believable.

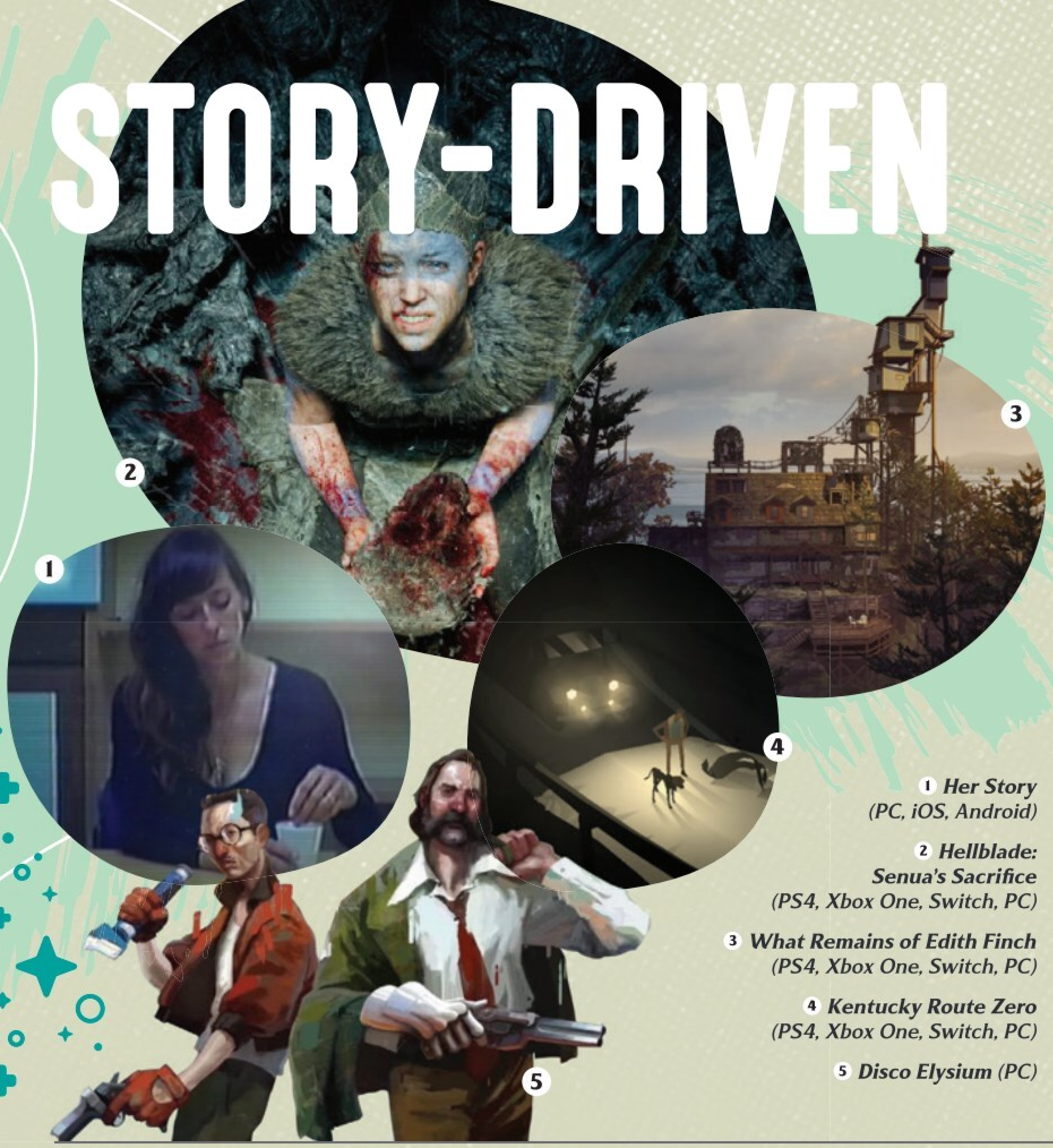
If you want to live the cowboy fantasy while also being treated to some of the best storytelling in the business, **Red Dead Redemption II** is for you. As part of an outlaw gang, Arthur Morgan explores a vast frontier as he tries to secure a better life for himself and his friends. Players can pull off heists, have shoot-outs, and even hop into an ever-evolving multiplayer mode. Rockstar Games has filled its world with countless events and secrets, so it feels alive in a way that no other open-world game can match.

Long-running series occasionally need to be revitalized to stay relevant, but **The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild** goes a step further. It completely reinvents Nintendo's classic franchise with an emphasis on open-world exploration, flexible combat, and the joy of discovery. Link glides and climbs through Hyrule, conquering shrines and making friends until he is able to confront Ganon. This entry forsakes the "visit dungeon, get item, beat boss" formula, finding a new level of freedom that helps it soar.

Many games tout the importance of player choice, but few can pull it off like **The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt**. CD Projekt Red presents decisions with no clear right or wrong path, and players must live with the consequences. Even if things don't turn out well, the array of well-written sidequests keeps you invested, along with satisfying combat against intimidating beasts. This sprawling RPG gives you an entire fantasy world to explore, and makes you feel like a capable warrior every step of the way.

1. ***The Last of Us Part II*** *(PS4)*
2. ***The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*** *(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)*
3. ***Red Dead Redemption II*** *(PS4, Xbox One, PC, Stadia)*
4. ***The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*** *(Switch)*
5. ***God of War*** *(PS4)*

STORY-DRIVEN



1 ***Her Story***
(PC, iOS, Android)

2 ***Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice***
(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

3 ***What Remains of Edith Finch***
(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

4 ***Kentucky Route Zero***
(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

5 ***Disco Elysium** (PC)*

Great gameplay keeps you entertained in the moment, but a great story can lodge itself in your memory for years. Of course, systems and mechanics are still important, but these games distinguish themselves with outstanding characters and original narratives.

The members of a cursed family keep dying in improbable ways, and you relive their final moments. Giant Sparrow's **What Remains of Edith Finch** turns that unusual premise into a compelling series of poetic vignettes.

Bizarre and captivating, **Disco Elysium** is unlike anything you have played before. You are a lousy and unstable cop trying to solve a murder, and developer ZA/UM surrounds you with fascinating dialogue and deep fiction to make the unique world more than a backdrop.

On one hand, Ninja Theory's **Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice** is about a quest to the Norse underworld. On the other hand, it's a bold and illuminating look at how Senua's mental illness can shape and distort the world around her, calling the nature of reality into question.

The freeform narrative of **Her Story** is assembled as players sift through video clips of a police interrogation. Because it's based on the keywords you choose to search, no two players see clues in the same order – but they all reach a similar, chilling conclusion.

Kentucky Route Zero is all about the journey, not the destination. Cardboard Computer's surreal road trip is full of dream logic and ambiguity. But amid the magical realism, it tells relatable tales about regret, community, and the debts we owe.

FIRST-PERSON SHOOTERS

For decades, firearms have been the default choice for video gaming weapons. Though many developers have branched out into more diverse experiences, some of the most popular, successful, and impressive games have you looking at the world down the barrel of a gun.

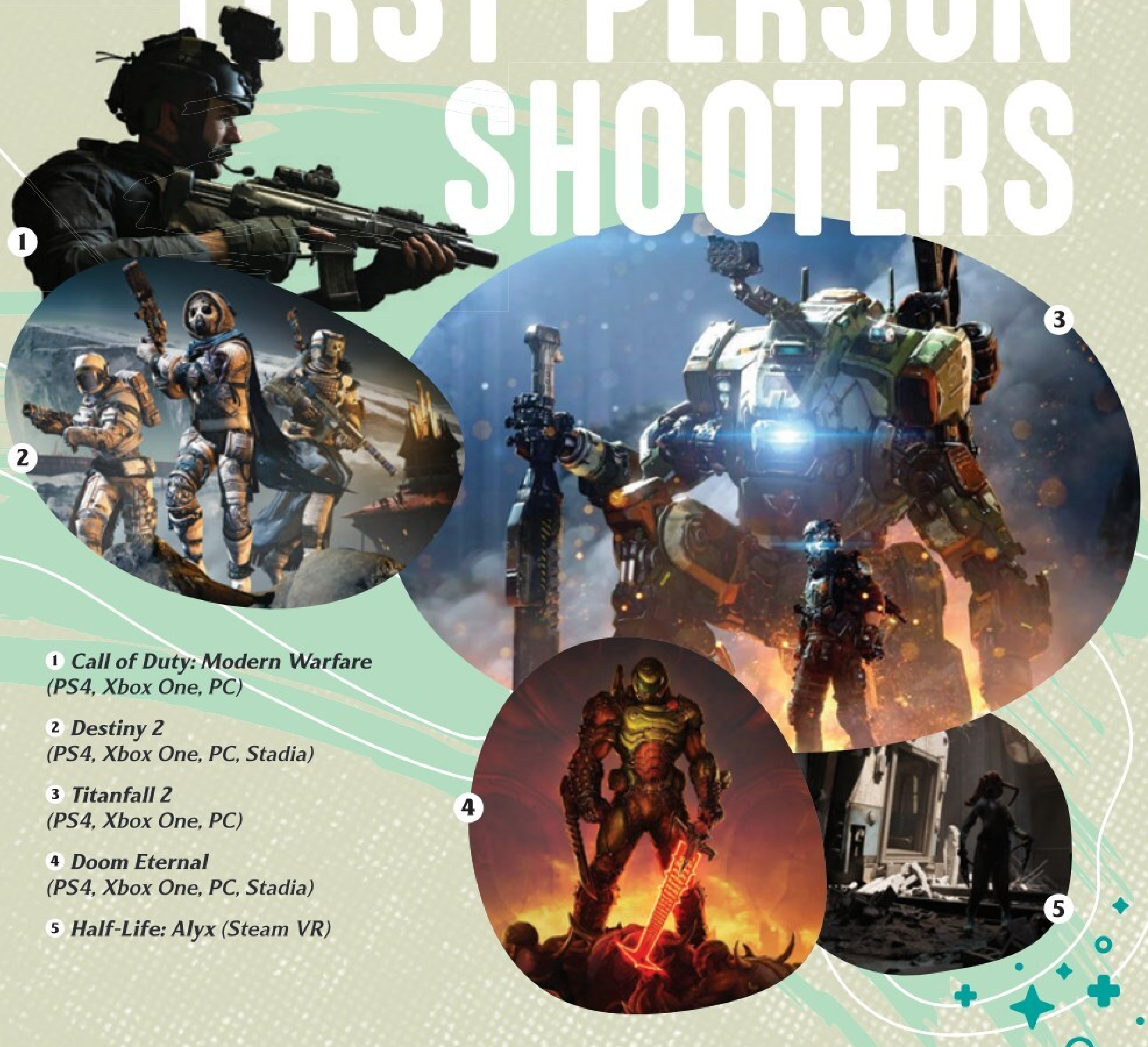
In **Destiny 2**, Bungie combines an evolving multiplayer world with best-in-class controls. The array of satisfying weapons (and ever-expanding opportunities to use them) make this shooter more than a game. It's a hobby by itself.

Want to have fun slaughtering gross demons? **Doom Eternal** is a romp through hell with a clever arsenal and thrilling traversal. Id Software fully understands and embraces its mission, providing a wild ride full of gore and adrenaline-fueled action.

Half-Life: Alyx isn't the sequel fans expected, but Valve's return to City 17 is amazing. Intuitive VR controls help you make the most of your environment and loadout, supported by immersive gunplay and a captivating world.

Entries of an annualized series can blend together, but **Call of Duty: Modern Warfare** stands out with its exciting tactical options and multiplayer progression. Infinity Ward also pulls off a great single-player story full of unexpected twists.

Flexibility and fun are the core of **Titanfall 2**. Giant robots, various playstyles, and stunning moments create a roller-coaster campaign. Meanwhile, Respawn's generous approach to multiplayer keeps you invested.



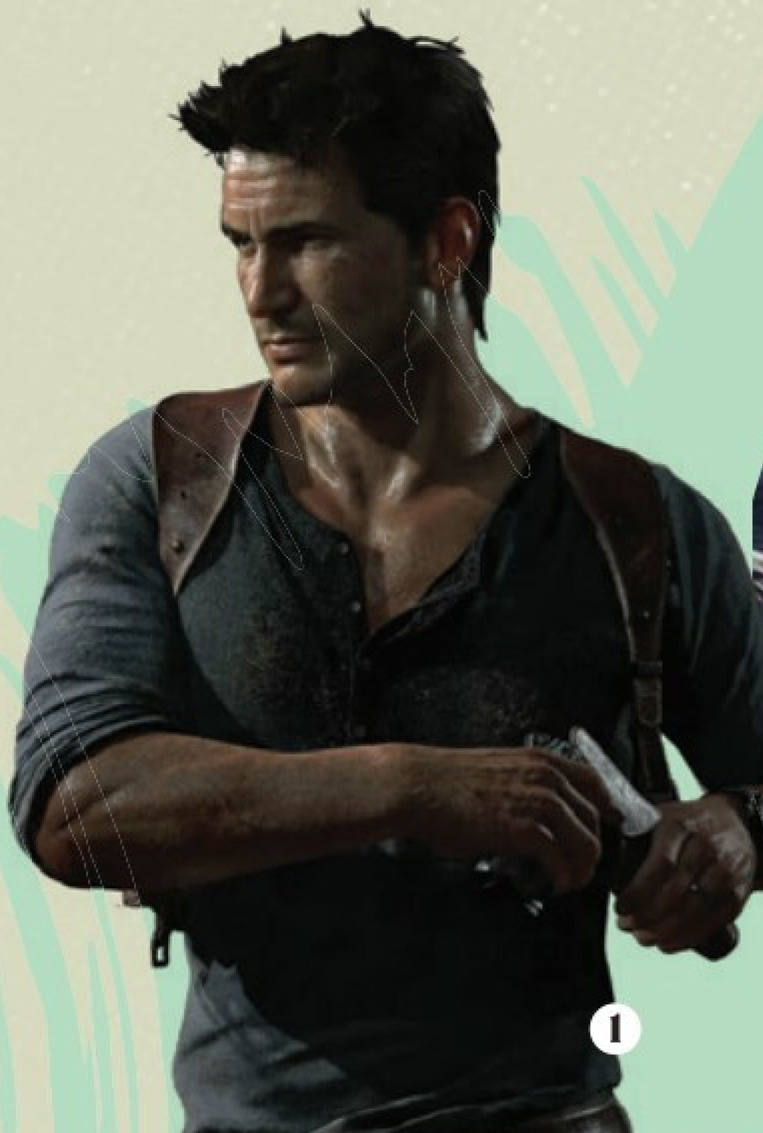
1 ***Call of Duty: Modern Warfare***
(PS4, Xbox One, PC)

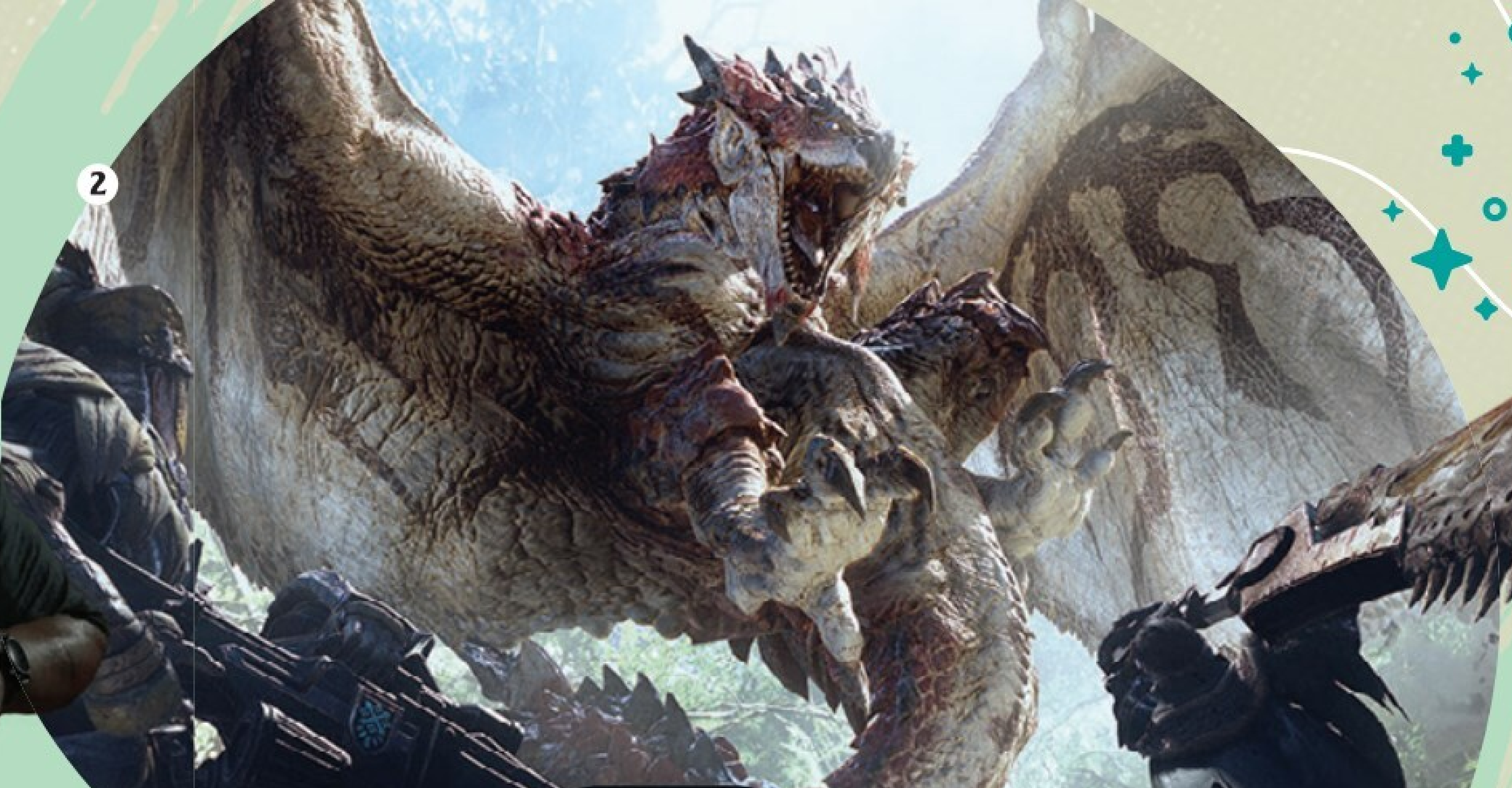
2 ***Destiny 2***
(PS4, Xbox One, PC, Stadia)

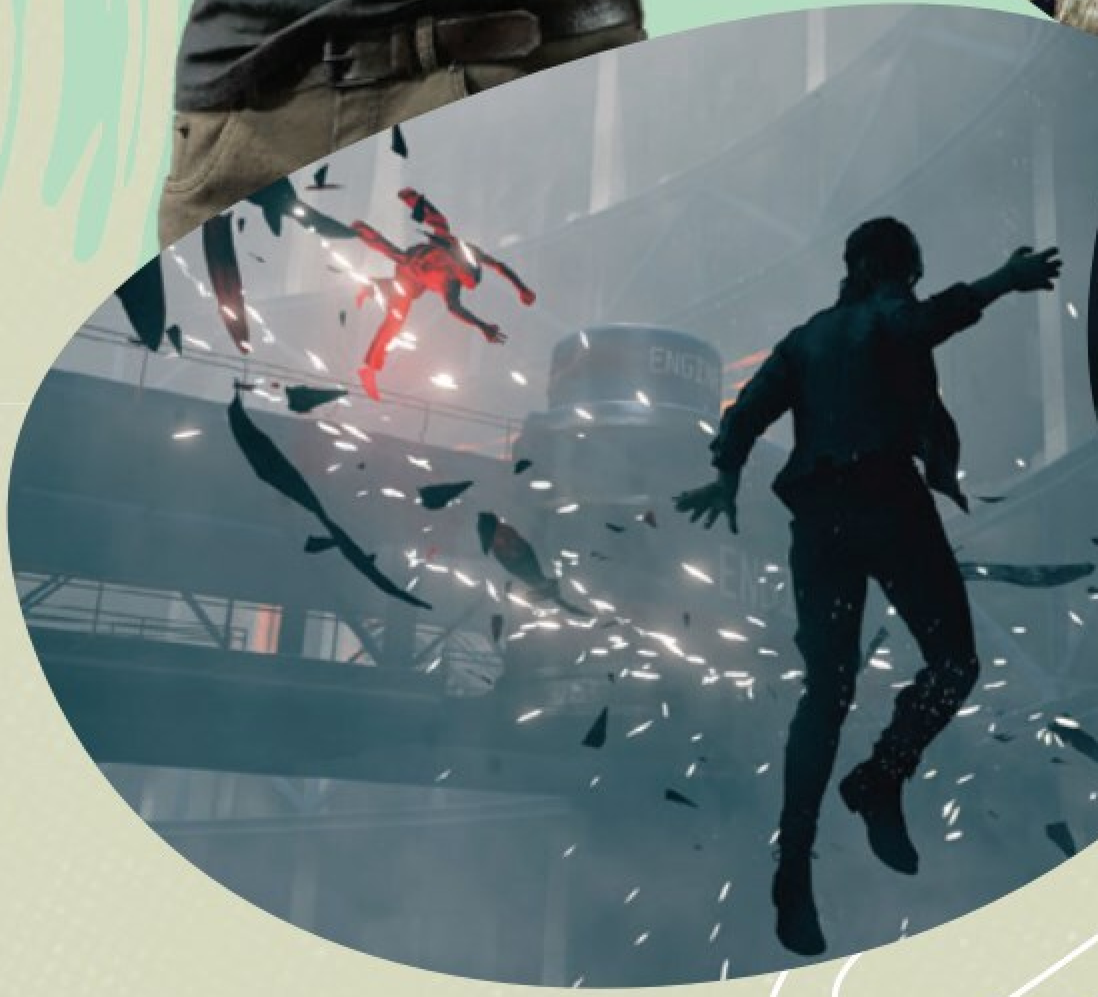
3 ***Titanfall 2***
(PS4, Xbox One, PC)

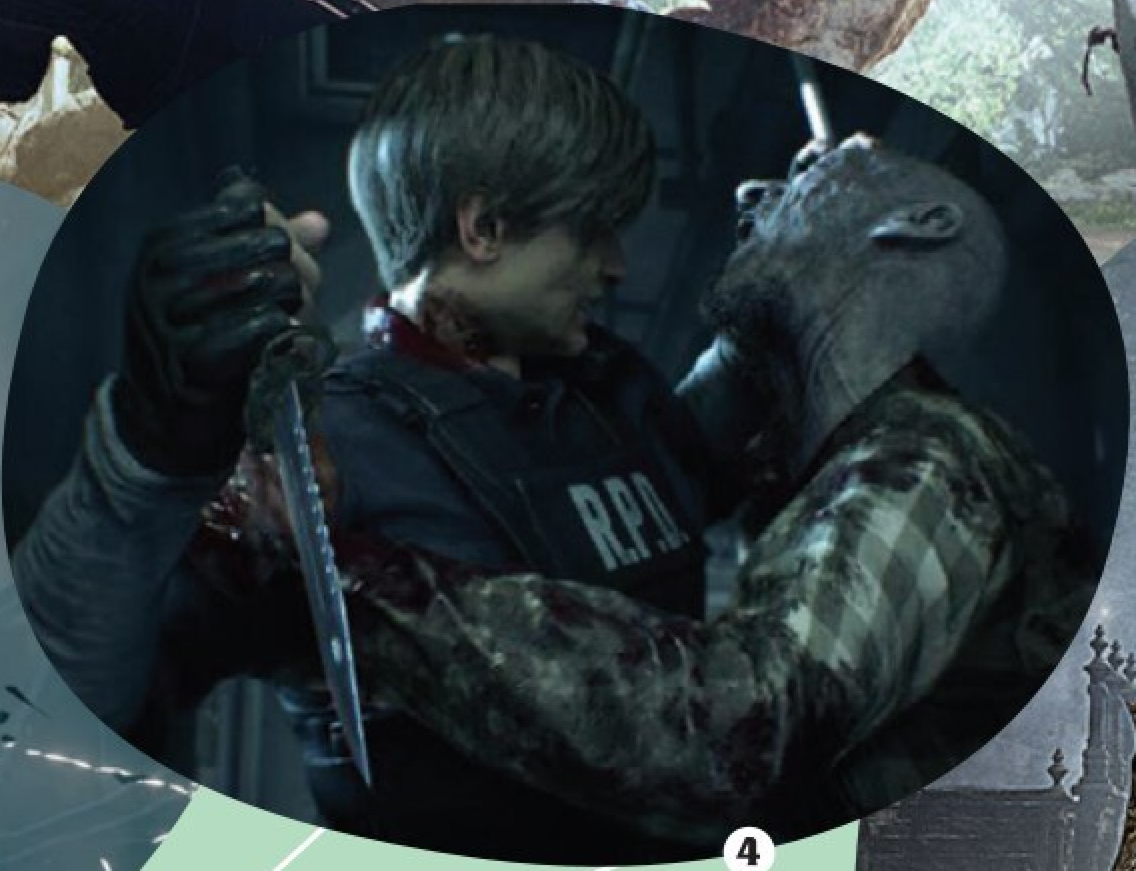
4 ***Doom Eternal***
(PS4, Xbox One, PC, Stadia)

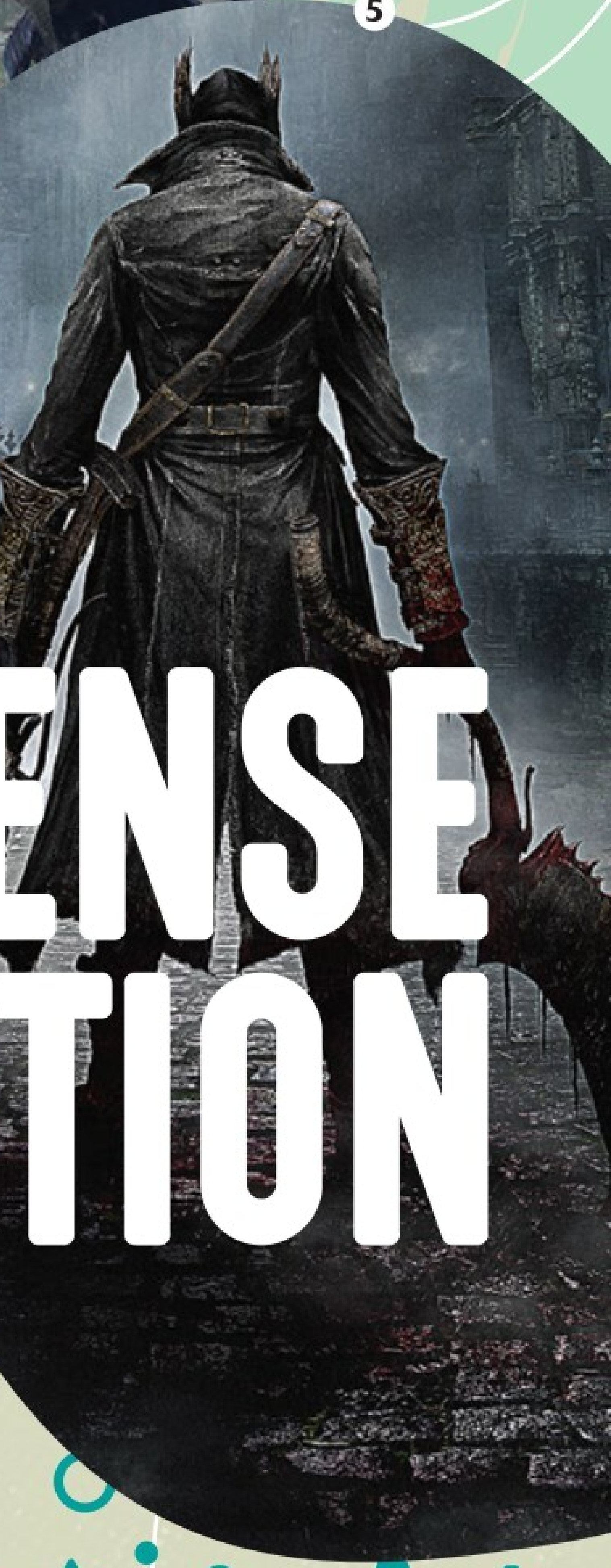
5 ***Half-Life: Alyx** (Steam VR)*











INTENSE ACTION

For all of their achievements in other areas, certain games are at their best in the heat of the moment: the death-defying leaps, last-minute escapes, and final sword slashes. After that, you get a moment to rest before your momentum propels you into another intense situation. Though they can still have great characters and worlds, these are the games to play if you thrive on danger and the triumph of survival.

Nathan Drake is the Indiana Jones of gaming, and **Uncharted 4: A Thief's End** is a thrilling finale to his adventures. Drake searches for treasure and reconnects with old friends, but the path is full of explosions, gunfights, and chases – not to mention plenty of precarious ledges to dangle from. Naughty Dog's reputation for impressive setpiece moments continues, but amid all the action, the story has surprising heart. Saying goodbye to Drake, Elena, and Sully is tough, but at least they get to quit while they're on top.

From Software's Souls series may have spawned a whole subgenre, but **Bloodborne** perfects it. Your hunter goes head-to-head with fiendish monsters and hideous bosses, all demanding precise timing and careful observation. Find a playstyle that appeals to you by experimenting with weapons like claws, guns, and transforming blades. Just don't expect a fair fight, because the eldritch horrors that lurk in this Lovecraftian setting will show you no mercy.

The titanic beasts of **Monster Hunter: World** make even the biggest sword look tiny – perfect for players who like overcoming the odds. You kill fierce monsters in epic battles, harvest their body parts, and then use those parts to craft even more powerful weapons and armor. The diversity of gear opens up dozens of possible playstyles, but you can't win every fight alone. That's why the cooperative multiplayer is key; only by teaming up with friends can you topple the most challenging foes Capcom crafted for this installment.

Control puts unbelievable power at your fingertips. Pick people up and throw them. Fly through the air. Create a shield out of concrete. Jesse can bend her surroundings to her will, but even those abilities are just enough to survive. Armed guards and otherworldly evils stand in Jesse's way, and Remedy designed encounters that strike a delicate balance between reasonable challenge and satisfying fantasy. Being smart about how you approach combat is the only way to find the answers hidden in the Oldest House.

Mr. X can always be just around the corner. That's just one of many hard lessons you learn in **Resident Evil 2**, the reincarnation of Capcom's survival-horror classic. The hulking, hat-wearing creature is just one of many terrifying foes you face in this reimagined return to Raccoon City. Zombie swarms and scarce resources force you to be deliberate as you shoot and stab your way through the outbreak, and the scares keep you off balance with looming threats and a haunting atmosphere.

1 ***Uncharted 4: A Thief's End*** *(PS4)*

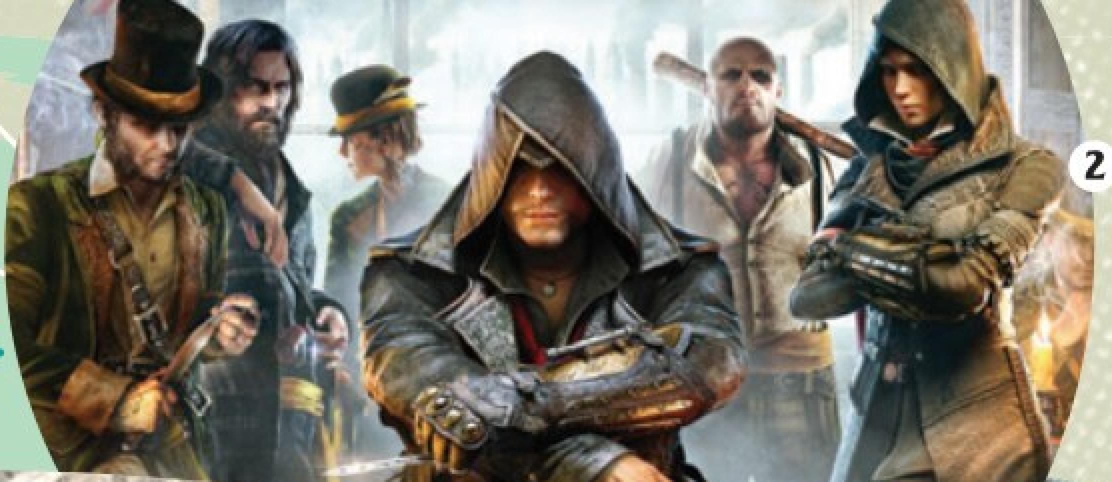
2 ***Monster Hunter: World*** *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*

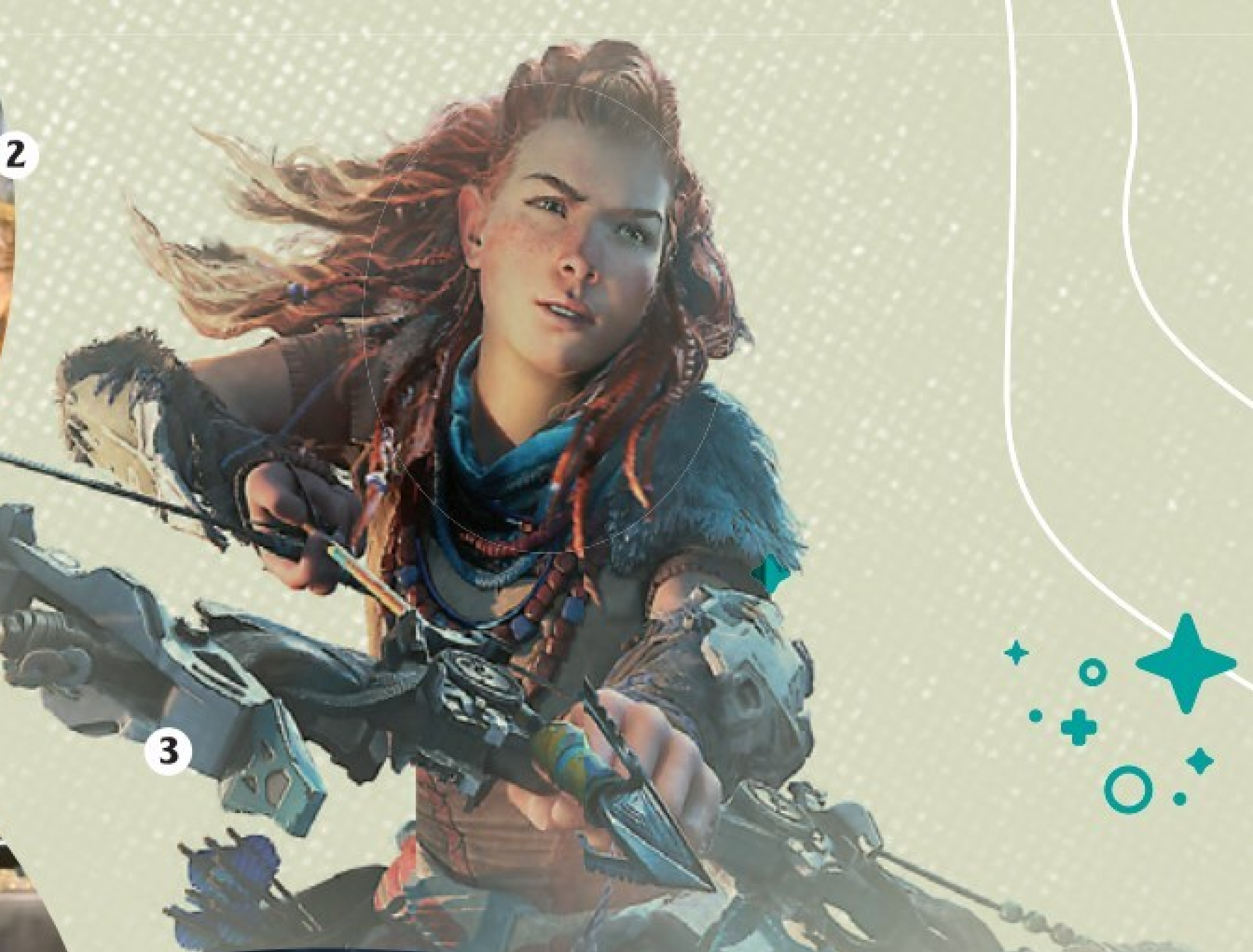
3 ***Control*** *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*

4 ***Resident Evil 2*** *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*

5 ***Bloodborne*** *(PS4)*

OPEN WORLDS





1 ***Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain*** *(PS4, Xbox One, PS3, Xbox 360, PC)*

2 ***Assassin's Creed Syndicate*** *(PS4, Xbox One, PC)*

3 ***Horizon Zero Dawn*** *(PS4, PC)*

4 ***Spider-Man*** *(PS4)*

5 ***Ghost of Tsushima*** *(PS4)*

With open-world games, players can be transported to different places that span time periods and realities. The ability to let us roam free in fully realized worlds makes this kind of experience especially immersive; it's like we live there ourselves, getting to know the people, mythology, and geography. Many games excel at providing cool settings to explore, but these are our picks for the best worlds to get lost in.

Sci-fi meets prehistory in **Horizon Zero Dawn**, which has robotic dinosaurs rampaging through a post-apocalyptic world. Aloy ventures into this vast and dangerous landscape, hunting the vicious machines with her trusty bow. Exploration, combat, and narrative all share the spotlight here, but Guerrilla Games pays special attention to building the lore and mystery of the unique setting. When you're looking forward to a new audio log as much as your next battle against a Thunderjaw, you know you're playing something special.

With so many Assassin's Creed games to choose from, it's hard to pick just one – but **Assassin's Creed Syndicate** is ultimately a distillation of everything the series does best. Evie and Jacob Frye's gradual takeover of London's boroughs makes you feel like an effective criminal kingpin, even when you're getting your hands dirty in timing-based combat and crafted assassination scenarios. The city has an unconventional, industrial beauty – and Ubisoft makes it a blast to explore when you are sailing up to the rooftops with a zipline.

Get your photo mode ready, because Sucker Punch's **Ghost of Tsushima** is the most stylishly striking open world in years. Serene mountains, gorgeous sunsets, falling cherry blossoms – you see it all on your journey through the Japanese countryside. Whether you're following foxes or paying your respects at shrines, the island is full of rewarding activities. The picturesque setting is inspired by samurai cinema, as is the precise sword-focused combat that includes noble duels and sneaky infiltration.

You've probably seen a few video game versions of New York, but not from the angle that Insomniac's **Spider-Man** provides. The streets blur past at high speeds as you swing and leap from one building to the next. This experience captures the acrobatic exhilaration of being Marvel's iconic hero unlike any game before it, letting you glide through the city with majestic ease. When your feet are on the ground, you're treated to a great comic-book story and superpowered combat.

For some open worlds, wandering around a massive map is more important than the tasks at hand. **Metal Gear Solid V: The Phantom Pain** sends players on missions in focused areas, but the depth of those areas is astounding. Kojima Productions built intricate systems that interact in clever ways, turning the various camps and compounds into playgrounds you can prod using tools like sleeping darts, canine companions, and cybernetic rocket arms. What the environment lacks in free-roaming distractions, it more than makes up for in density.

OLD-SCHOOL CHARM

The past influences the present in many ways, but these games take direct inspiration from the gameplay and visuals of bygone eras. They still innovate and impress on their own, but a certain retro aesthetic is an undeniable part of their appeal.

If you like Metroid, then you cannot miss **Axiom Verge**. Trapped on a hostile alien planet, you explore dangerous passages and hunt for secrets using an inventive arsenal of weapons and mobility-focused powers.

Undertale subverts your expectations at every turn. Developer Toby Fox turns this classic-style RPG into a wild ride full of delightful characters, timing-based combat, and meta-story that blows your mind.

It may look like an old-timey cartoon, but Studio MDHR's **Cuphead** is a side-scrolling gauntlet that requires unflinching focus. The challenge can be unforgiving, but that just makes your eventual triumph even more cathartic.

Pixelated platformers don't get much better than **Celeste**. Developer Matt Makes Games mixes responsive controls and elegant puzzles to tell a story of self-discovery, all framed by the trek up an intimidating mountain peak.

Team Cherry's **Hollow Knight** is a fusion of 2D exploration and demanding combat. Gorgeous graphics and animations create a desolate world, but the sense of discovery (and cool abilities) make the many dangers worth facing.

① ***Hollow Knight***
(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

② ***Celeste***
(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC, Stadia)

③ ***Axiom Verge***
(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Wii U, Vita, PC)

④ ***Undertale***
(PS4, Switch, Vita, PC)

⑤ ***Cuphead***
(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

WHOLESOME FUN

Don't worry about turning these games off when your family enters the room. They're great to play with an audience, or when you just want a break from tough decisions and heavy narratives. The main thread running between these experiences is an emphasis on the joy of play.

Nintendo's industry-defining plumber has another outstanding adventure in **Super Mario Odyssey**. Taking control of enemies adds an irresistible new wrinkle to the combination of inventive puzzles and inviting worlds.

Live the quiet life in ConcernedApe's **Stardew Valley** by building up your farm and becoming a pillar of the community. Hard work and patience pay off as you perform chores and make friends, allowing you to build a peaceful little farming empire.

The welcoming storybook vibe in **Ori and the Will of the Wisps** hides challenging combat and platforming. Even so, the heartwarming story and lush world create an uplifting experience that even tops Moon Games' stellar first entry.

Dreams can be as complicated or simple as you like. Media Molecule's fantastic creation tools let you shape your own interactive experiences, or surf through user-made content to see other people's strange and wonderful ideas brought to life.

Set your own goals and customize your island in a cute escape from reality. **Animal Crossing: New Horizons** is your ticket to relaxation; Nintendo's laid-back simulation provides an idyllic setting for players to share, socialize, and optimize.

① ***Animal Crossing: New Horizons*** *(Switch)*

② ***Ori and the Will of the Wisps***
(Xbox One, PC)

③ ***Stardew Valley***
(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, Vita, PC, iOS, Android)

④ ***Super Mario Odyssey*** *(Switch)*

⑤ ***Dreams*** *(PS4)*

MIND-BENDERS

Sometimes mental agility is more important than quick reflexes. Whether you're assembling clues or organizing blocks, the "a-ha" moment when a puzzle clicks into place is an energizing thrill. These games let you chase that feeling, rewarding brainpower instead of firepower.

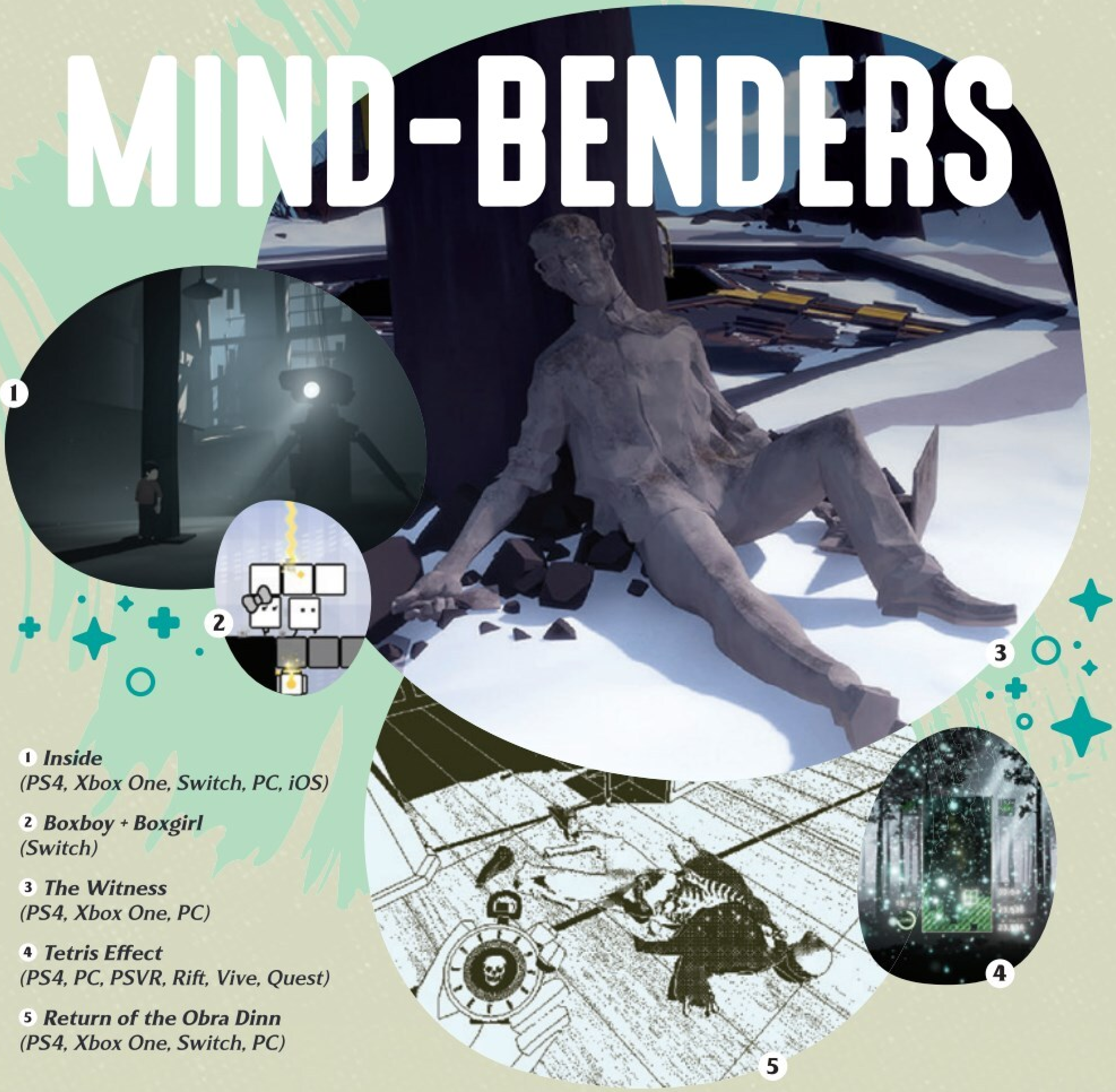
Drawing lines on a grid doesn't seem too hard. **The Witness** (from Braid designer Jonathan Blow) takes that straightforward idea and unfolds it into a surprising variety of complex puzzles that test your logic and observation.

A ship floats empty in the middle of the ocean, but what happened to the crew? That's what you figure out in Lucas Pope's **Return of the Obra Dinn**, which makes it deviously fun to discern the identities of the missing sailors.

Tetris Effect is classic block-dropping with a hypnotic new layer. Developers Monstars and Resonair enhance the action with responsive music and visuals that morph as you play, plus a new "zone" mechanic to help you set up big clears.

Playdead's **Inside**, like Limbo before it, is a brilliant and haunting journey. Careful timing and thorough experimentation are required to progress through the nightmarish world, and the solutions are clever without being overcomplicated.

With its minimal visual style, **Boxboy + Boxgirl** highlights HAL Laboratory's clever puzzle design. The simple concept of placing boxes is used to build bridges, steps, and other ways for you (and a co-op buddy) to bypass obstacles.



❶ ***Inside***
(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC, iOS)

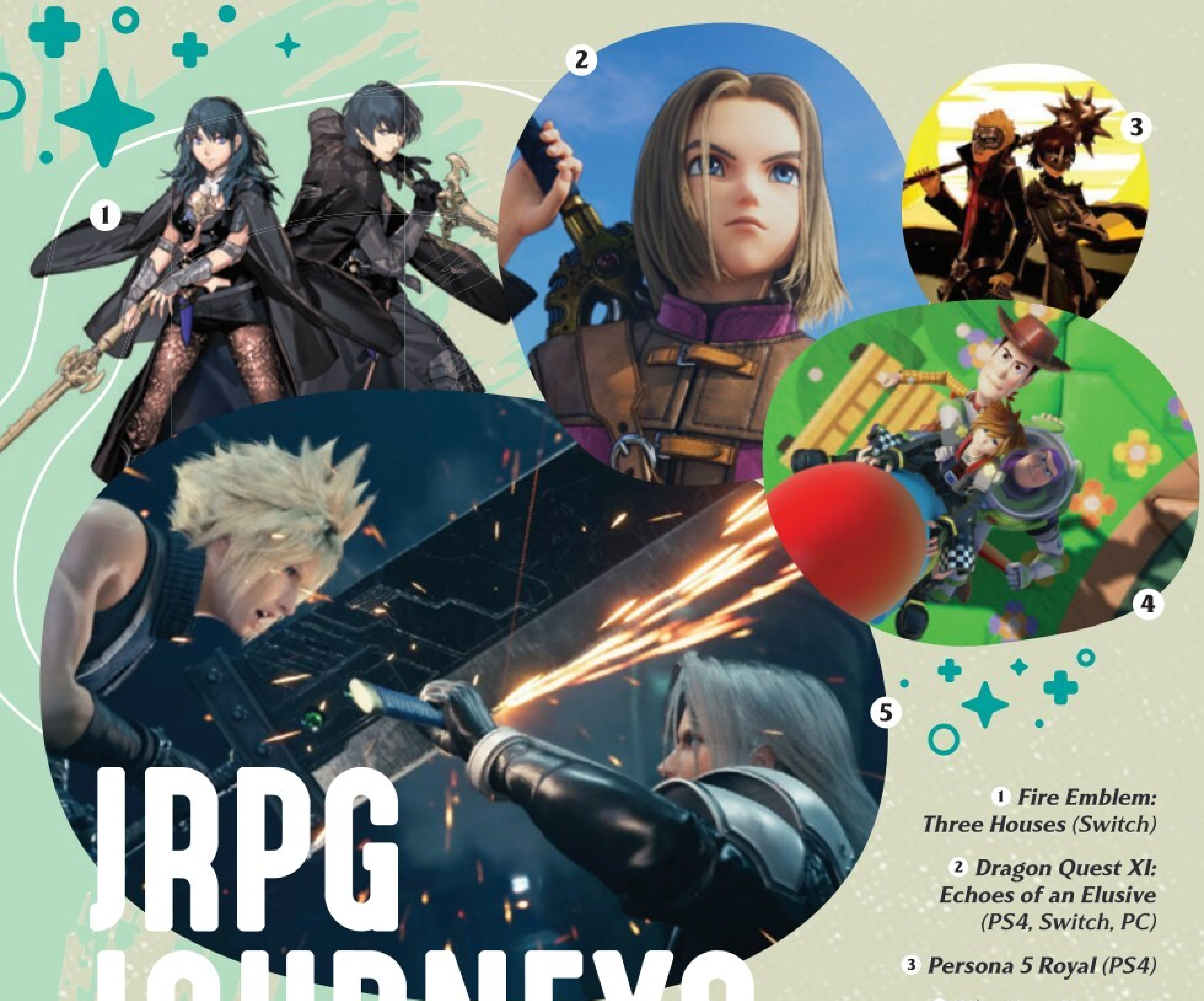
❷ ***Boxboy + Boxgirl***
(Switch)

❸ ***The Witness***
(PS4, Xbox One, PC)

❹ ***Tetris Effect***
(PS4, PC, PSVR, Rift, Vive, Quest)

❺ ***Return of the Obra Dinn***
(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

JRPG JOURNEYS



❶ ***Fire Emblem:***
Three Houses *(Switch)*

❷ ***Dragon Quest XI:***
Echoes of an Elusive
(PS4, Switch, PC)

❸ ***Persona 5 Royal*** *(PS4)*

❹ ***Kingdom Hearts III***
(PS4, Xbox One)

❺ ***Final Fantasy VII***
Remake *(PS4)*

As more games incorporate ideas drawn from JRPGs, the qualities that define the genre have gotten blurrier; it isn't just turn-based battles and anime cutscenes anymore. We're applying the label here to games that embody some of the genre's purest ideals, including strategic combat, satisfying progression, and intriguing character development

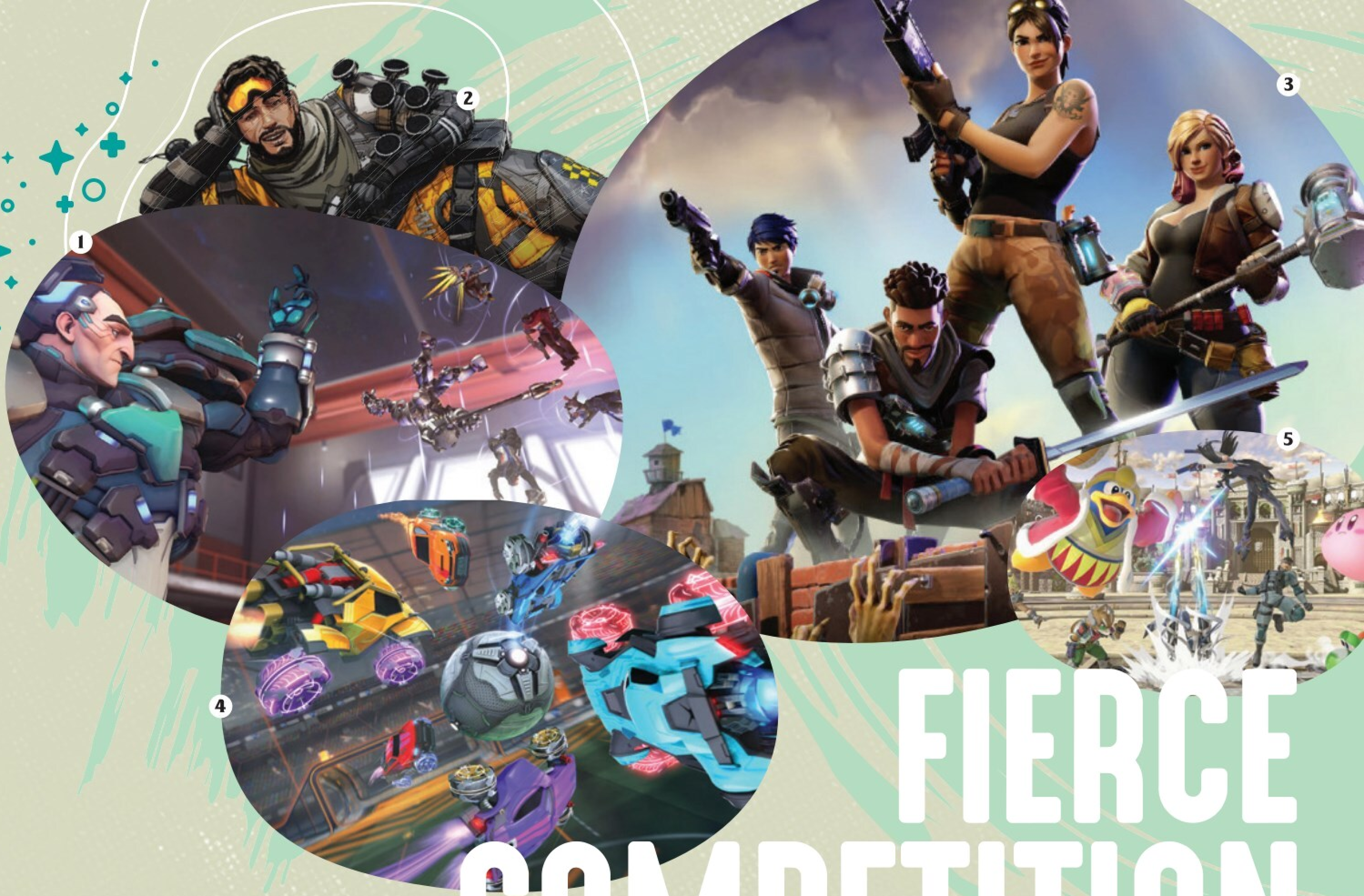
Part RPG and part simulation, **Persona 5 Royal** has you saving the world while also balancing your friendships and schoolwork. It's a long and complicated journey from Atlus, but full of great moments and stylish flair.

Dragon Quest XI: Echoes of an Elusive Age sticks close to the series' traditions, but with several modern touches. Likeable party members, challenging bosses, and a colorful world make Square Enix's classic formula feel fresh again.

Connections are at the heart of Nintendo's **Fire Emblem: Three Houses**. As a professor, you forge memorable bonds with your students, guiding them in their personal lives and through top-notch tactical combat.

Final Fantasy VII Remake walks the impossible line between surprise and nostalgia. Square Enix appeals to fans of the original by reimagining the characters and setting, but injects new life into the battle system and story.

The twisting tale of **Kingdom Hearts III** finally gives fans some answers, even if the tale is inscrutable to newcomers. Square Enix's spectacle-filled adventure has iconic Disney characters and settings alongside action-oriented combat.



FIERCE COMPETITION

The taste of victory is sweet, and video games are uniquely equipped to bring people from around the globe together to compete. Though sports and racing games translate real-life competitive events into a digital format, here we're focusing on the kinds of clashes that don't exist anywhere else. Defeat your opponents with improbable weapons, magic powers, and cars that push the laws of physics to their limits.

Fortnite needs no introduction. Epic Games' battle royale isn't just a fun game; it's a cultural phenomenon that captures the spirit of competition through clever play and continuous improvement. Shootouts, scavenging, and the thrill of survival keep you playing match after match – and no game ever plays out quite the same, especially with the steady stream of updates keeping the action fresh. All of this (and more) is why we gave Fortnite our Generation Defining award, which you can read more about on page 18.

While the core concepts behind hero shooters have been around since the days of Team Fortress 2, Blizzard's **Overwatch** deserves credit for modernizing and popularizing the format. The exciting roster of cool characters makes it hard to pick a favorite, especially since they all have interesting and distinct playstyles. Every match is full of opportunities to showcase your individual skill and your ability to function as a team, with nail-biting close calls and one-in-a-million shots that keep you coming back for more.

If you combine Fortnite and Overwatch, you end up with something like **Apex Legends**. Respawn's team-focused battle royale challenges three-player groups to survive using character-driven powers and an innovative ping system. The movement and gunplay feel great, and the different abilities add a layer of strategy to the combat beyond simply trying to collect the best gear. As a live service, Apex Legends has only improved with time, receiving new content and tweaks that push players to stay at the top of their game.

Super Smash Bros. Ultimate provides multiplayer bouts involving Nintendo's classic characters alongside a host of cameos from across the industry. But this game isn't just about seeing Mario go head-to-head with Cloud Strife; it also has the delightful ability to accommodate players of all skill levels. Smash Bros. is great for casual brawling among friends, but it can also be an intricate fighter that tests the skills and strategies of hardcore players. This entry refines ideas from the past, but also has fun new twists on the action.

Soccer played by R.C. cars? Why not! Psyonix's **Rocket League** puts players in control of cute, agile vehicles that tear around the field to knock a ball into their opponents' goal. You get last-second saves, exciting breakaways, and ridiculous four-wheeled action. Behind all of the chaos is an irresistible mixture of luck and skill, with impressive physics and polished controls that turn every five-minute match into a series of plays worthy of the highlight reel. ◆

1 ***Overwatch***
(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

2 ***Apex Legends***
(PS4, Xbox One, PC)

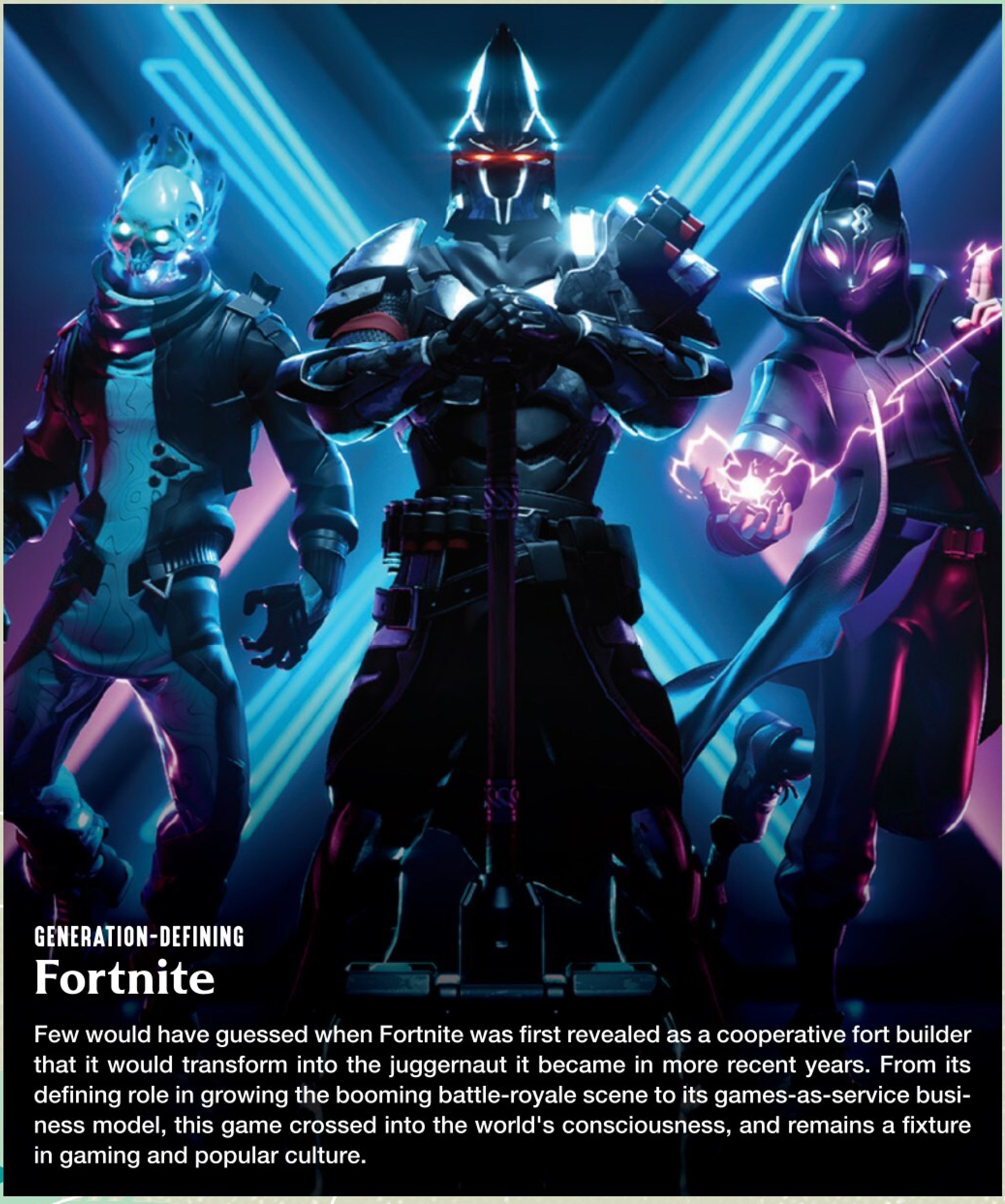
3 ***Fortnite***
(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC, iOS, Android)

4 ***Rocket League***
(PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC)

5 ***Super Smash Bros. Ultimate***
(Switch)

LAURELS & LEGACIES

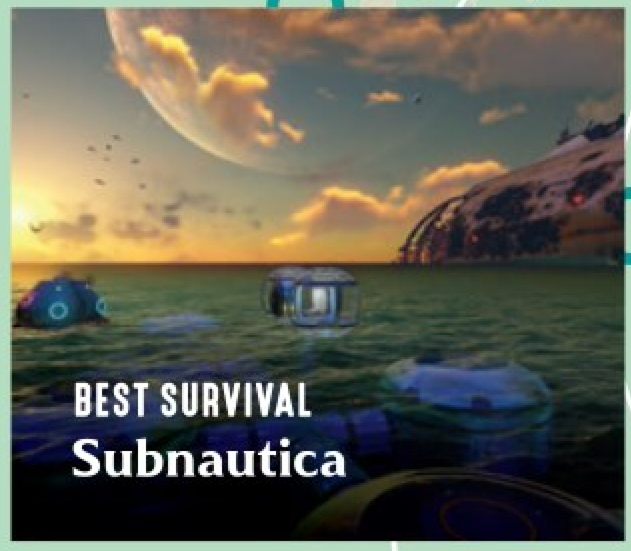
Some games were the standard-bearing must-plays of the last generation, like those highlighted over the past few pages. But other projects earn our praise for the features and experiences that set them apart, pushing technology, design, and overall fun to new heights. Here are our individual awards for the games that shaped the last generation of the hobby. ***by Matt Miller***



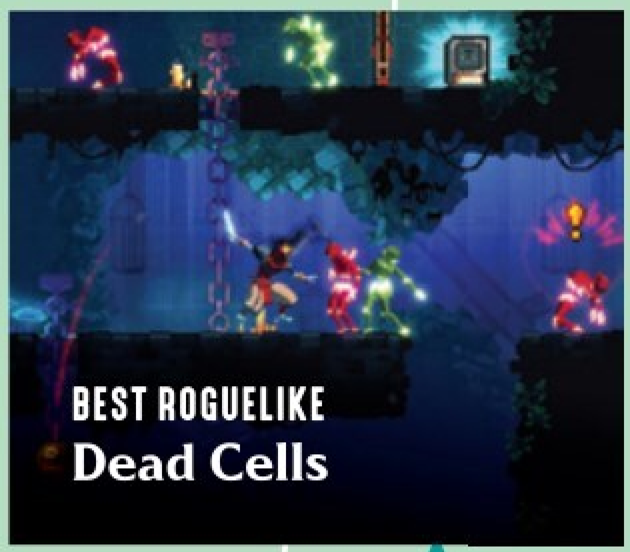
GENERATION-DEFINING

Fortnite

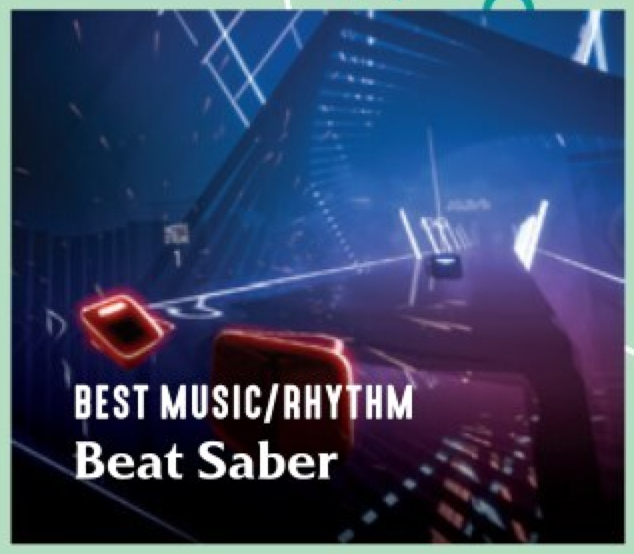
Few would have guessed when Fortnite was first revealed as a cooperative fort builder that it would transform into the juggernaut it became in more recent years. From its defining role in growing the booming battle-royale scene to its games-as-service business model, this game crossed into the world's consciousness, and remains a fixture in gaming and popular culture.



BEST SURVIVAL
Subnautica

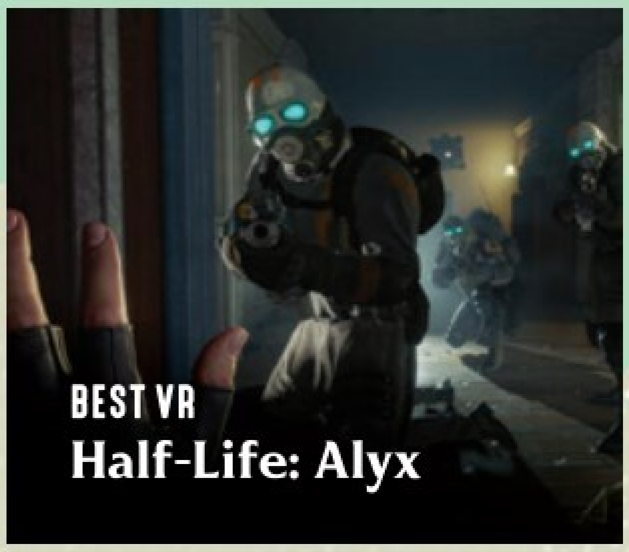


BEST ROGUELIKE
Dead Cells

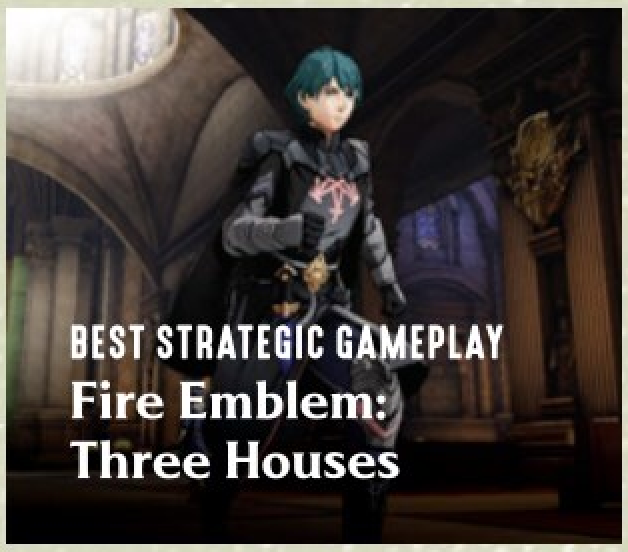


BEST MUSIC/RHYTHM
Beat Saber

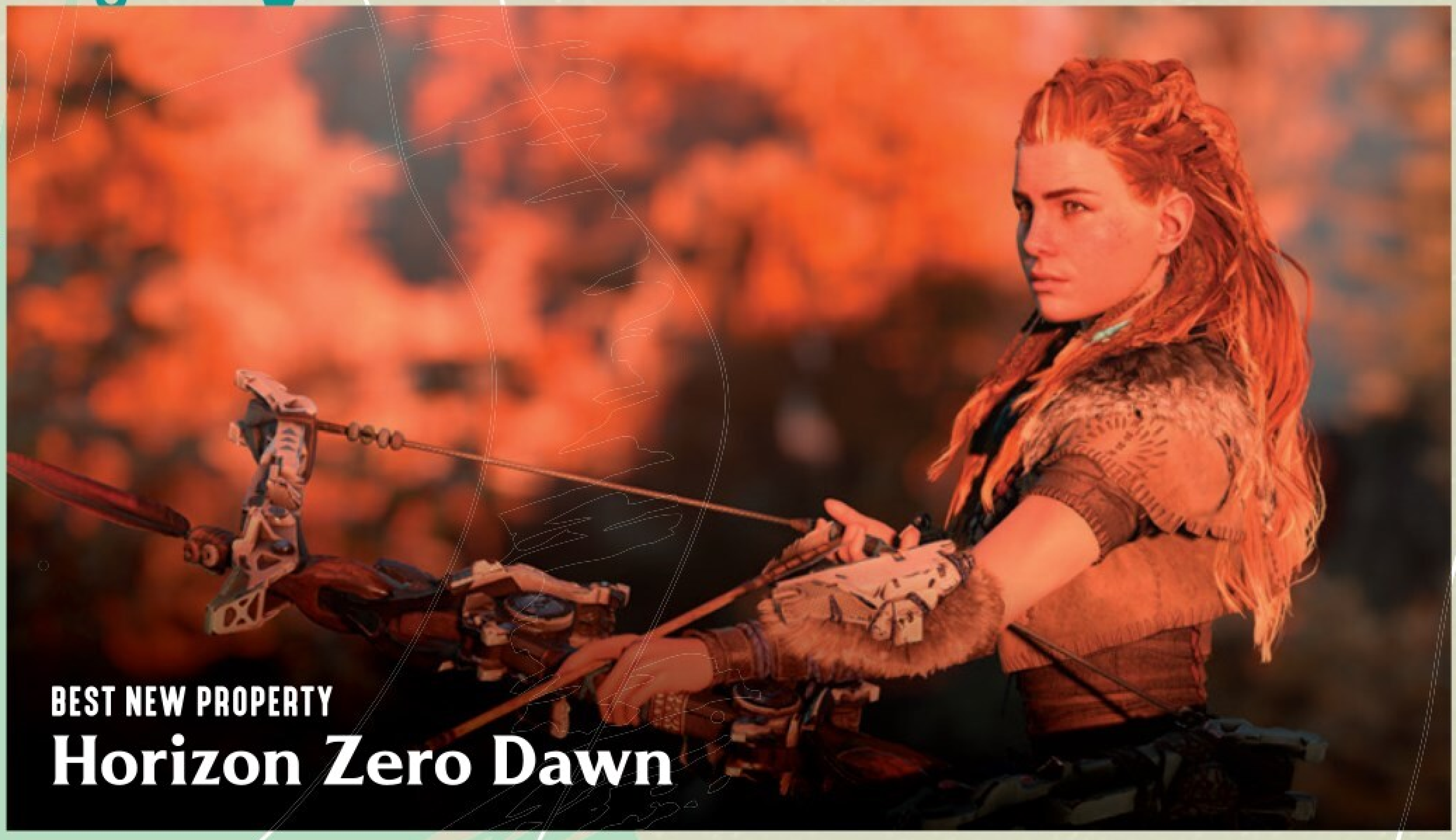
BEST ARCADE ACTION
Resogun



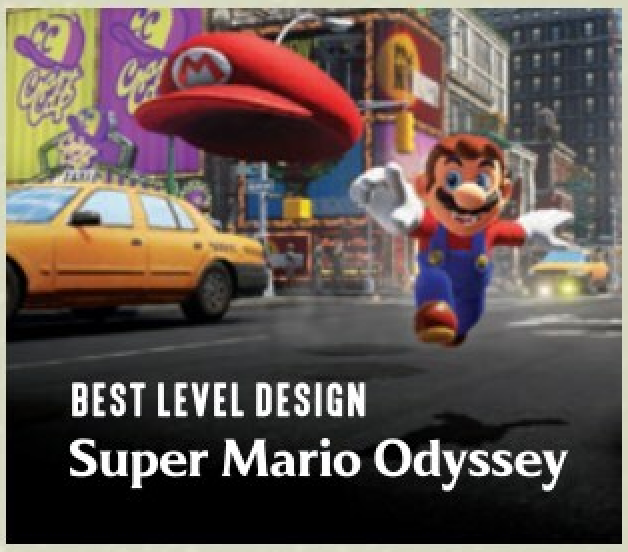
BEST VR
Half-Life: Alyx



BEST STRATEGIC GAMEPLAY
Fire Emblem: Three Houses



BEST NEW PROPERTY
Horizon Zero Dawn

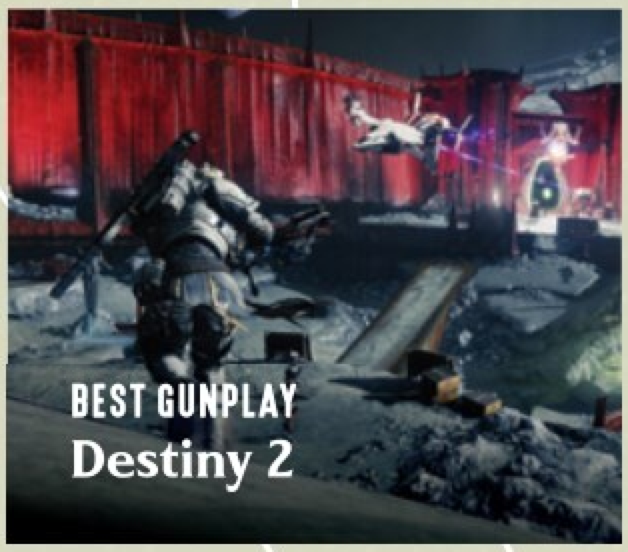


BEST LEVEL DESIGN
Super Mario Odyssey

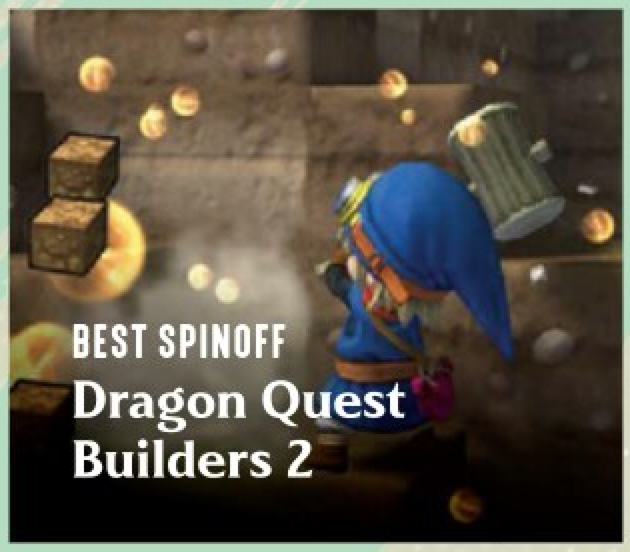
BEST LEVEL BUILDING
Super Mario Maker 2

BEST RETRO REVIVAL
Sonic Mania

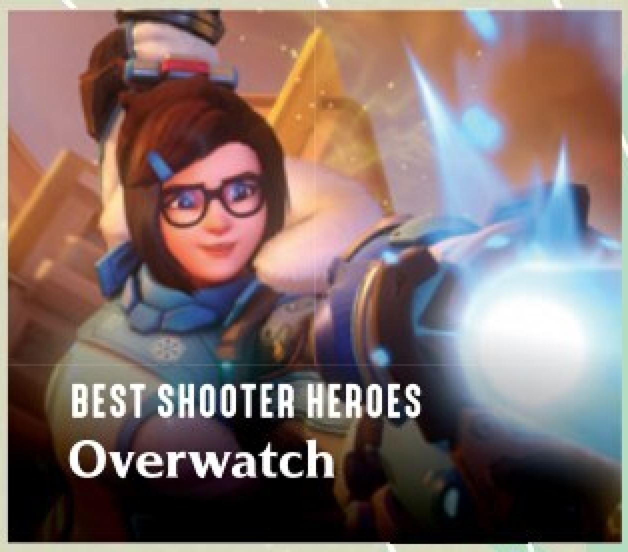
BEST EVOLUTION
Assassin's Creed Odyssey



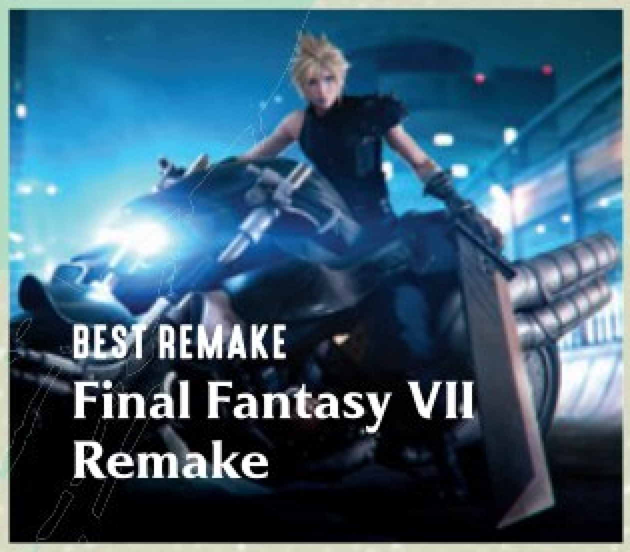
BEST GUNPLAY
Destiny 2



BEST SPINOFF
Dragon Quest Builders 2

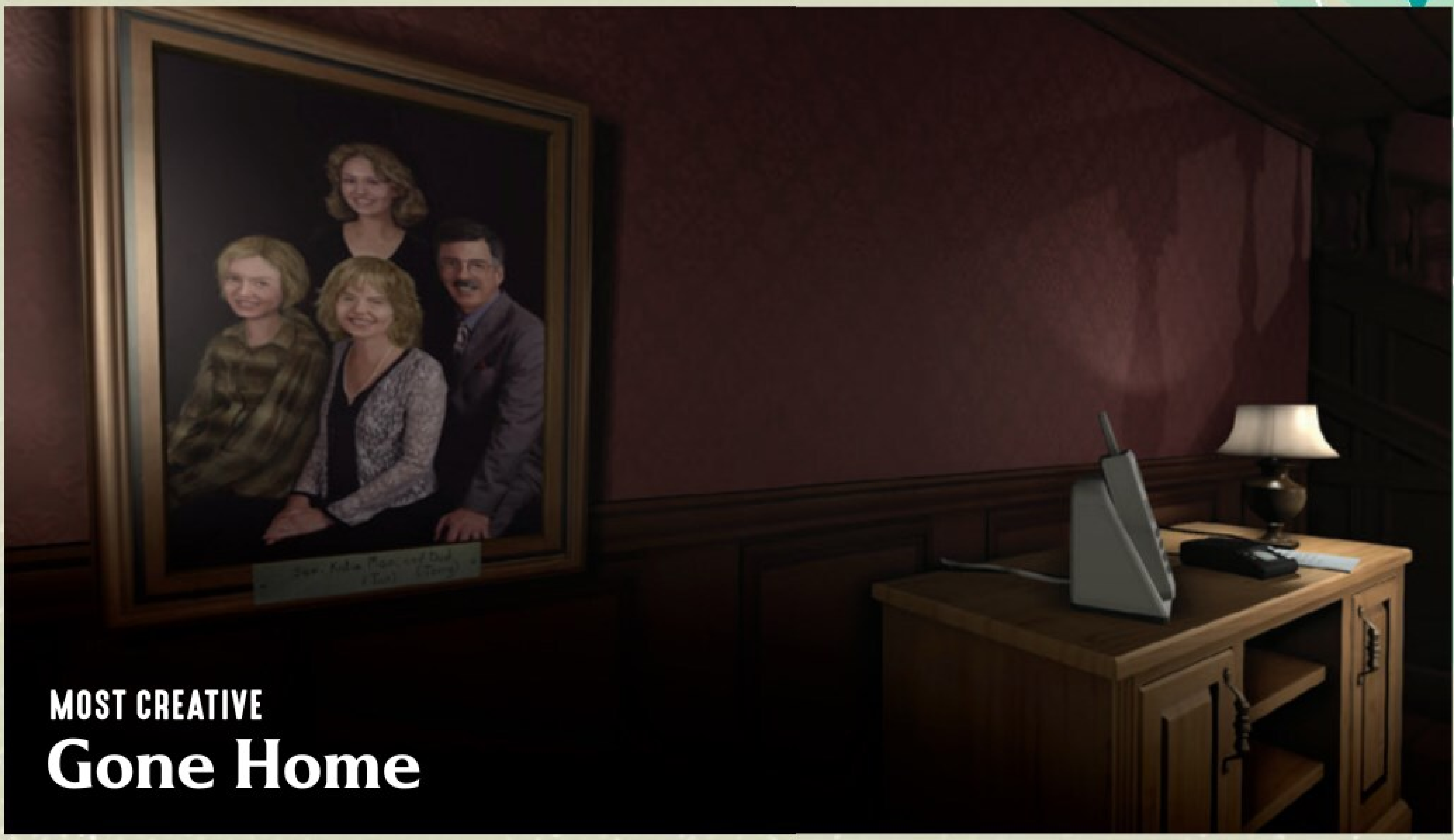


BEST SHOOTER HEROES
Overwatch

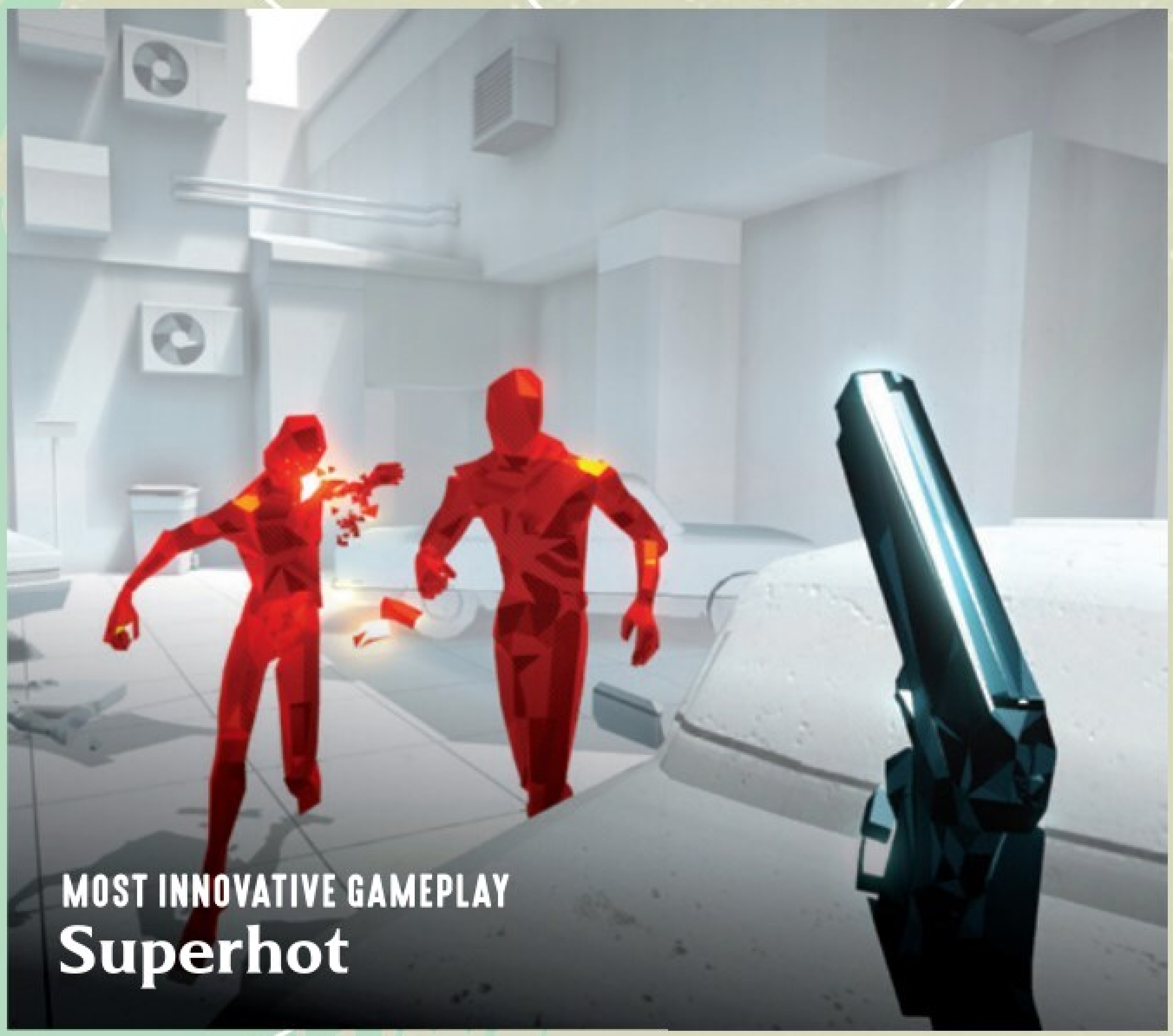


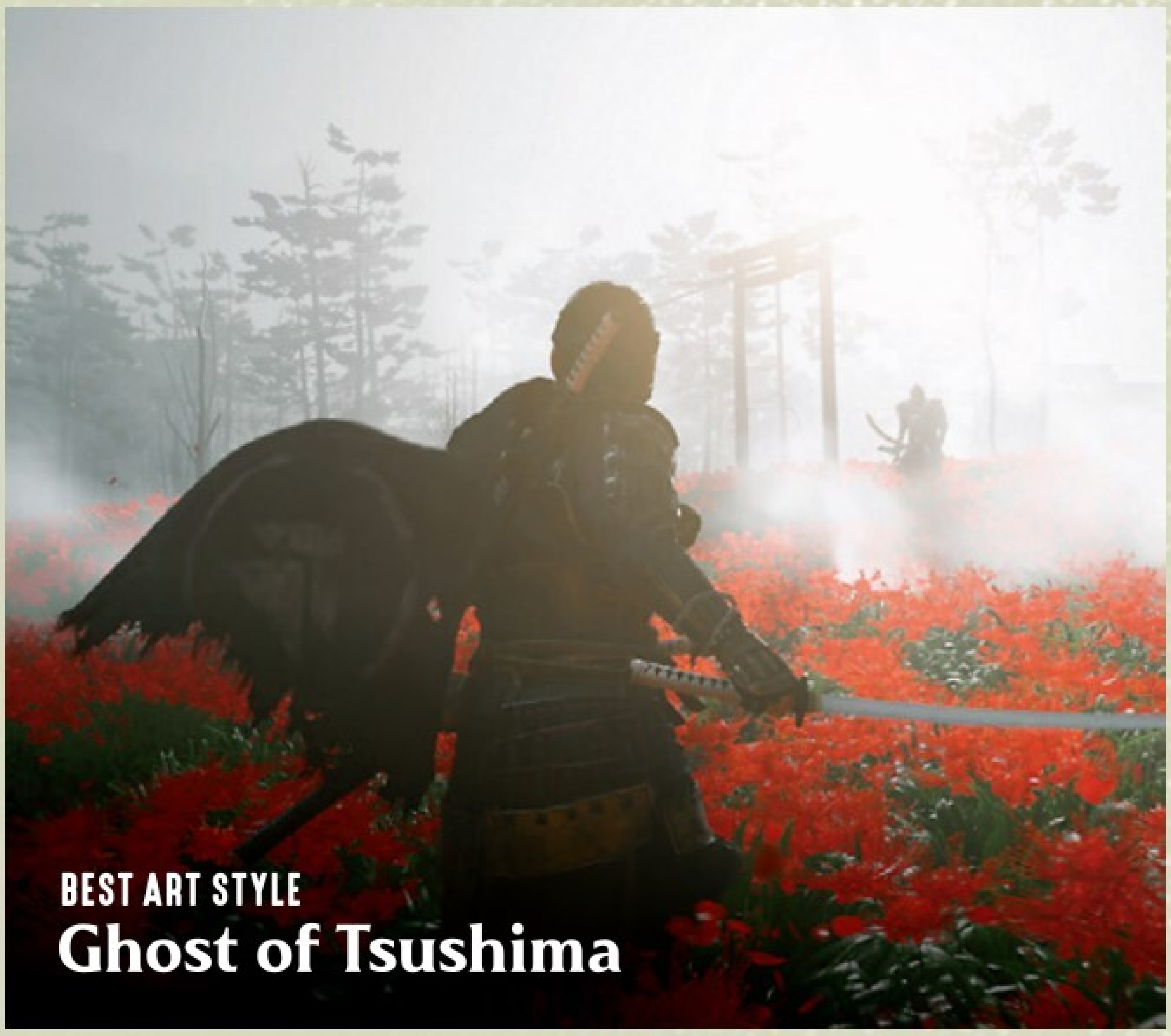
BEST REMAKE
Final Fantasy VII Remake

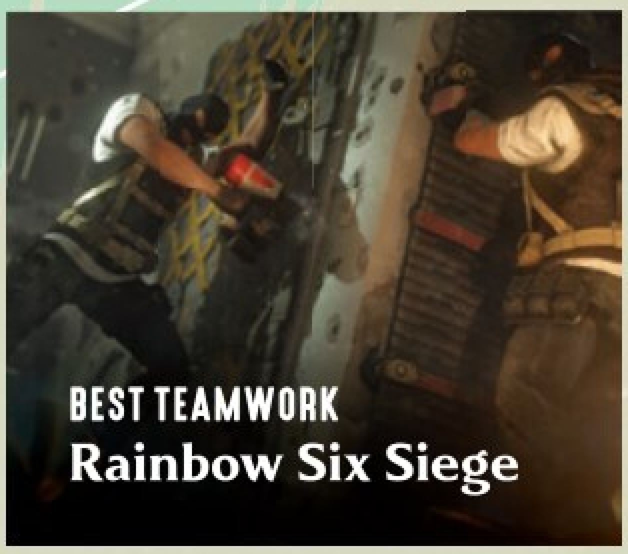
BEST REMASTER
Shadow of the Colossus



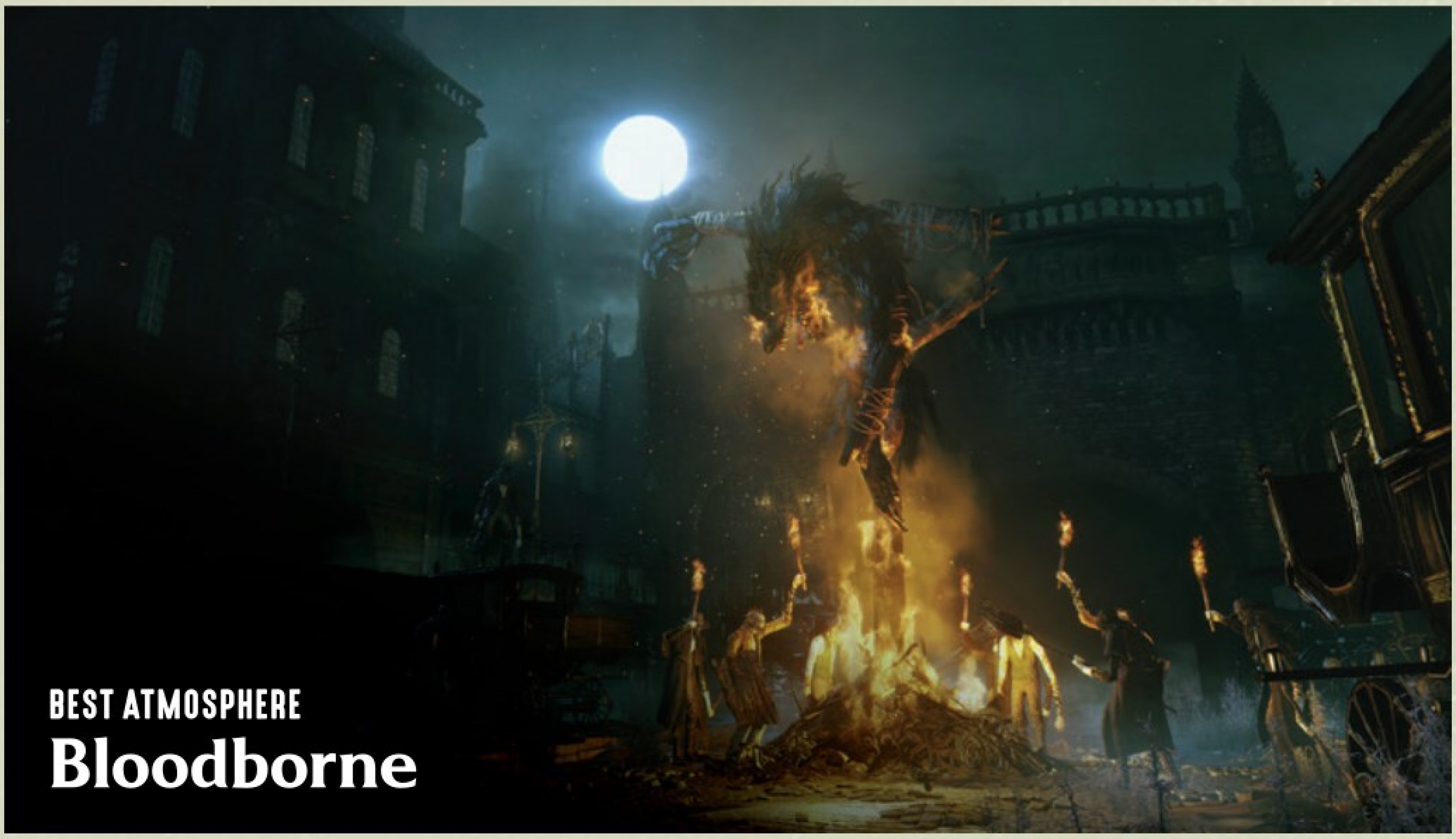
MOST CREATIVE
Gone Home

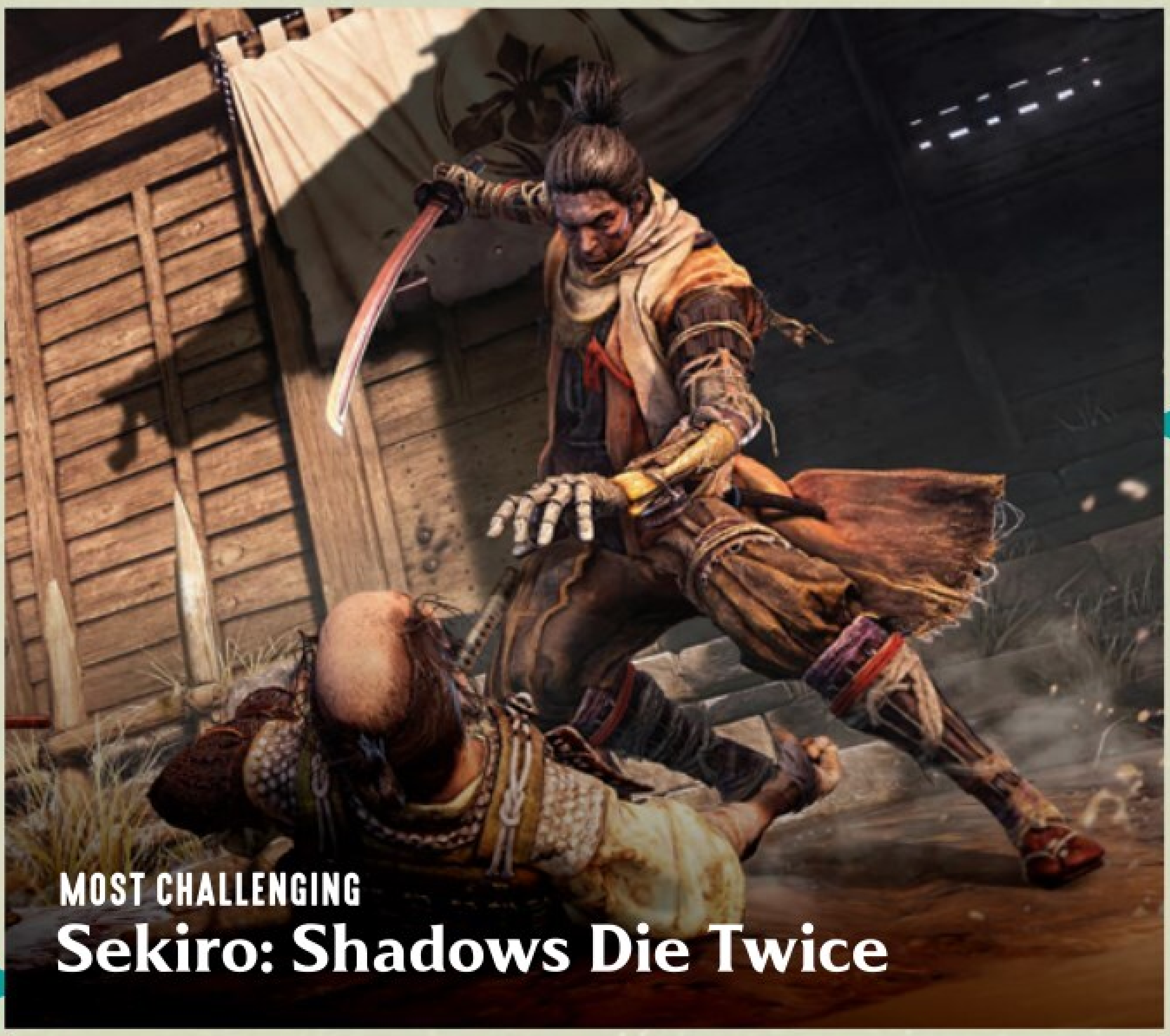

MOST INNOVATIVE GAMEPLAY
Superhot

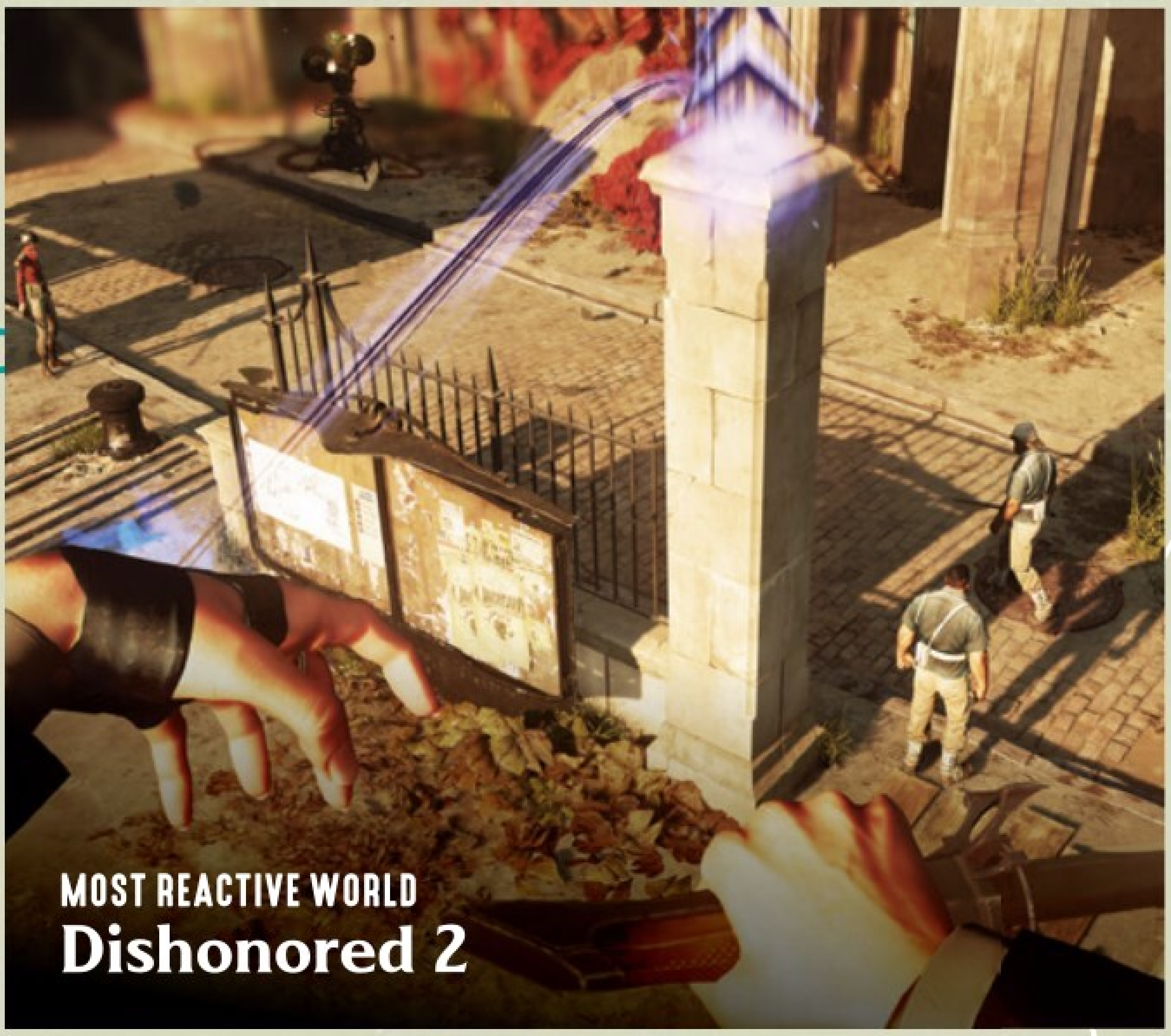

BEST ART STYLE
Ghost of Tsushima


BEST TEAMWORK
Rainbow Six Siege

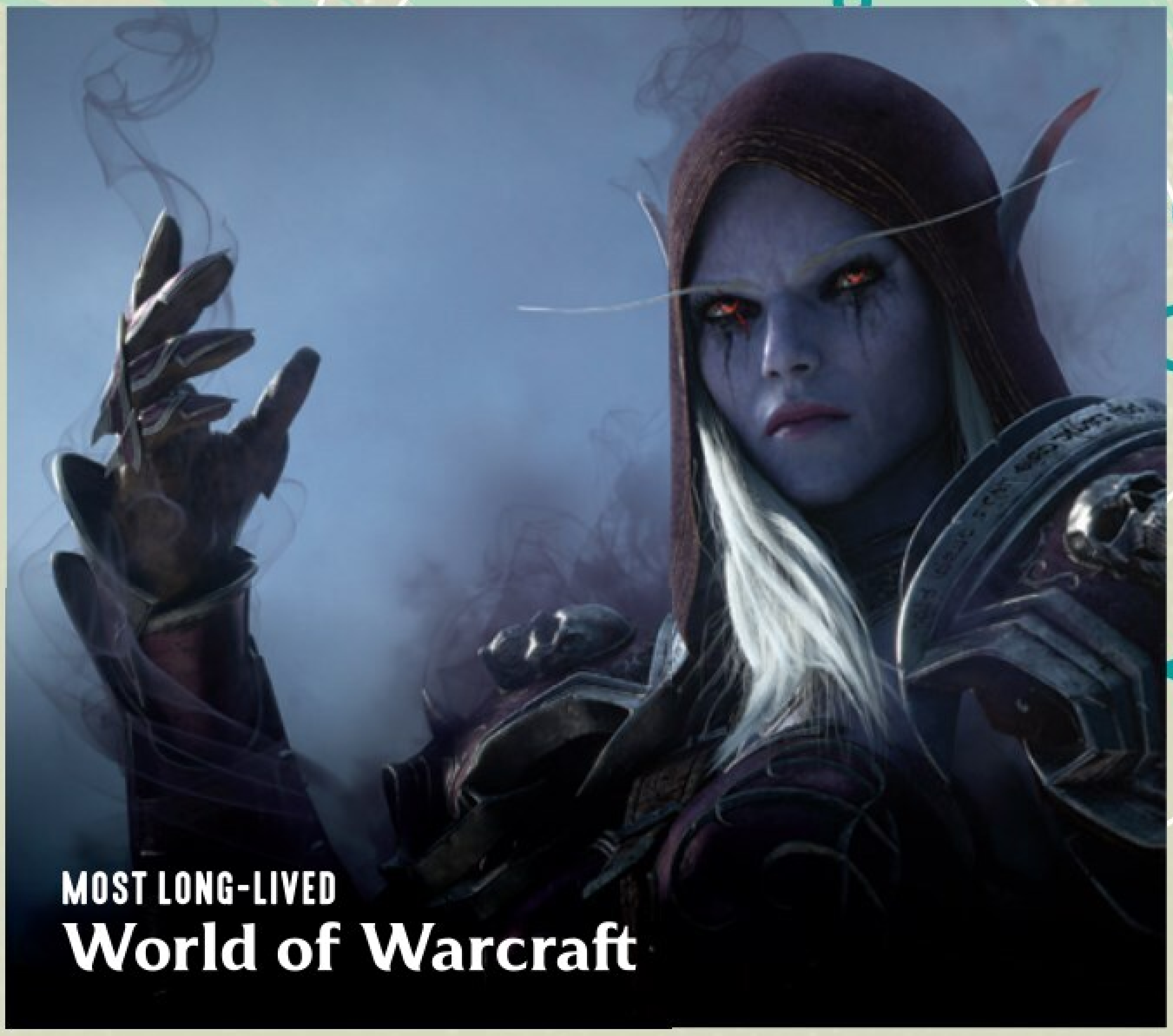
MOST BALANCED
Into the Breach

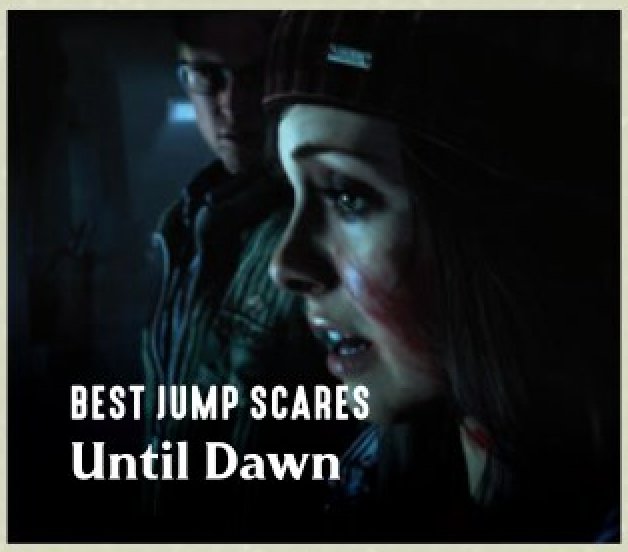

BEST ATMOSPHERE
Bloodborne


MOST CHALLENGING
Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice


MOST REACTIVE WORLD
Dishonored 2

MOST IMPROVED
No Man's Sky

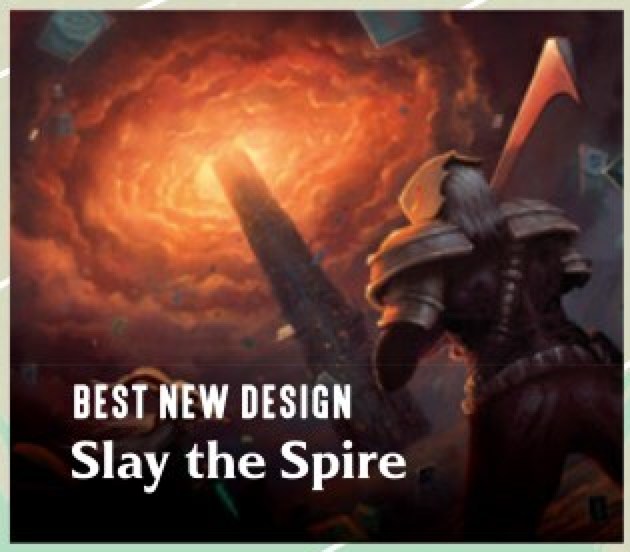

MOST LONG-LIVED
World of Warcraft


BEST JUMP SCARES
Until Dawn

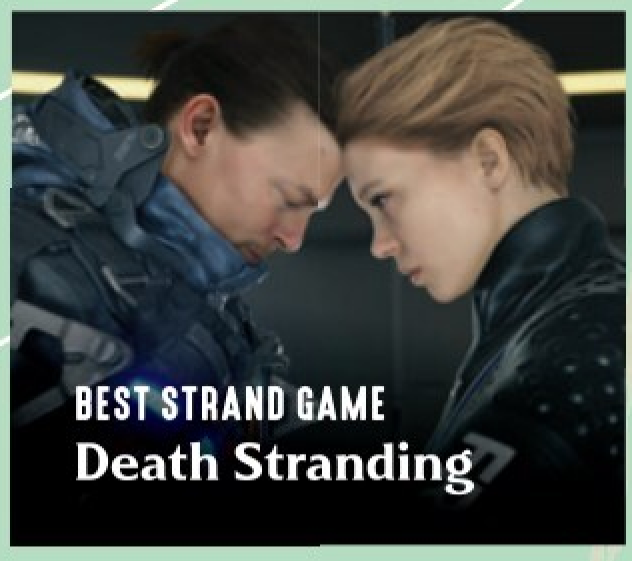
BEST BREAKOUT SERIES
Yakuza

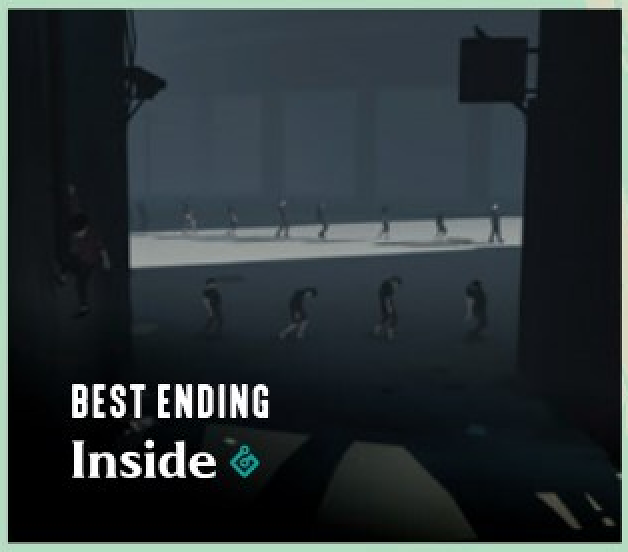
BEST SPIRITUAL SUCCESSOR
The Outer Worlds

MOST ADORABLE
Slime Rancher


BEST NEW DESIGN
Slay the Spire

BEST CHOICES
The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt


BEST STRAND GAME
Death Stranding


BEST ENDING
Inside ◈

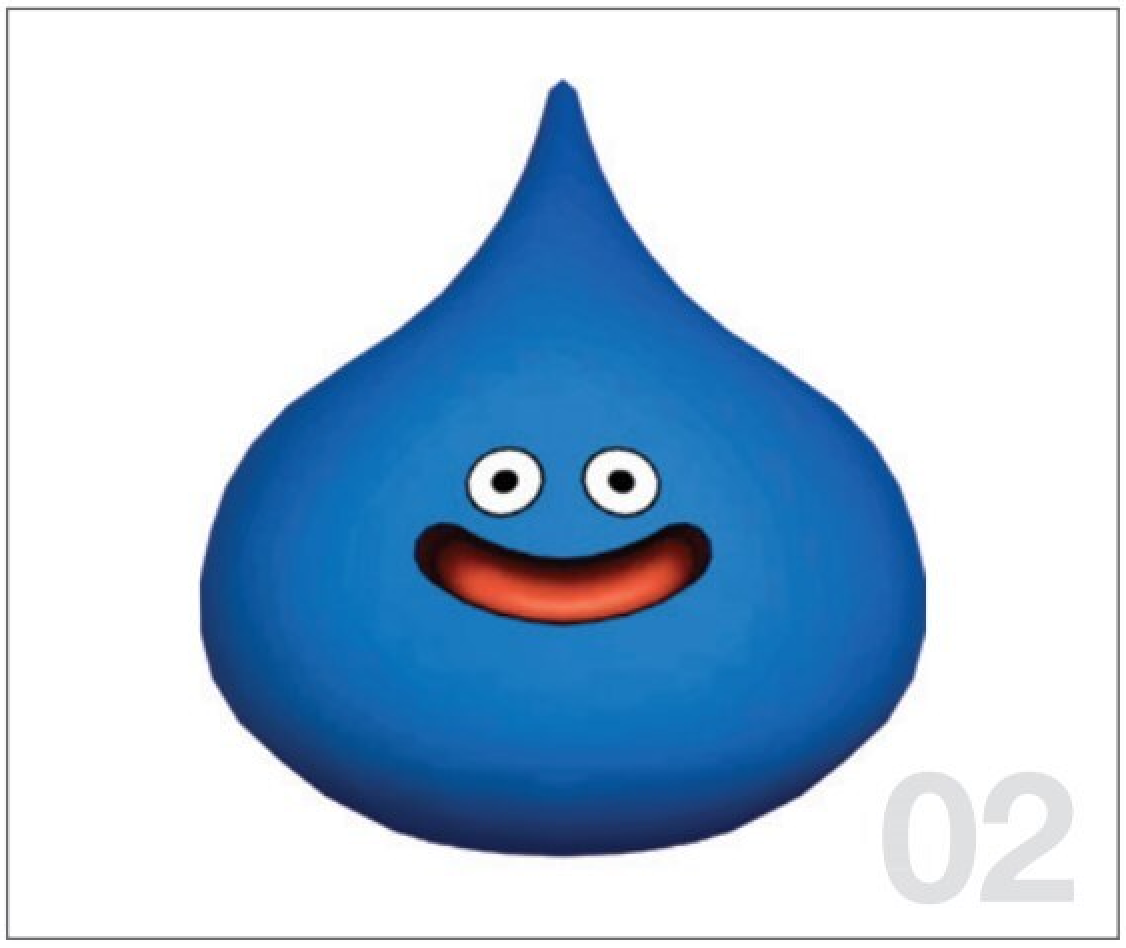
DISARMINGLY CUTE VIDEO GAME ENEMIES

by Ben Reeves

Standard Sentry Turrets

Portal

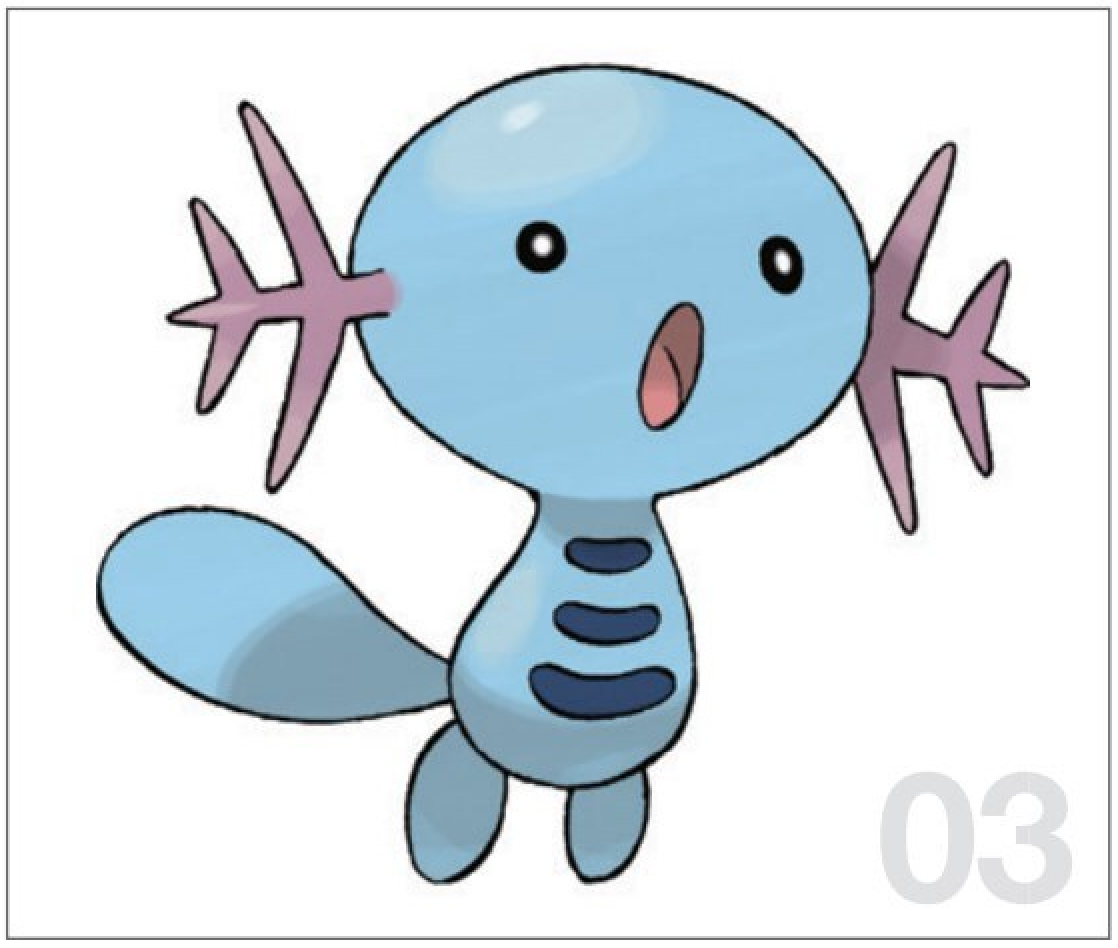
Aperture Science's miniature tripod robots are good at guarding any corner you put them in – as long as a strong gust of wind doesn't knock them over. And, we love how politely they ask to be put down. They probably didn't mean face down on the floor.



Slimes

Dragon Quest

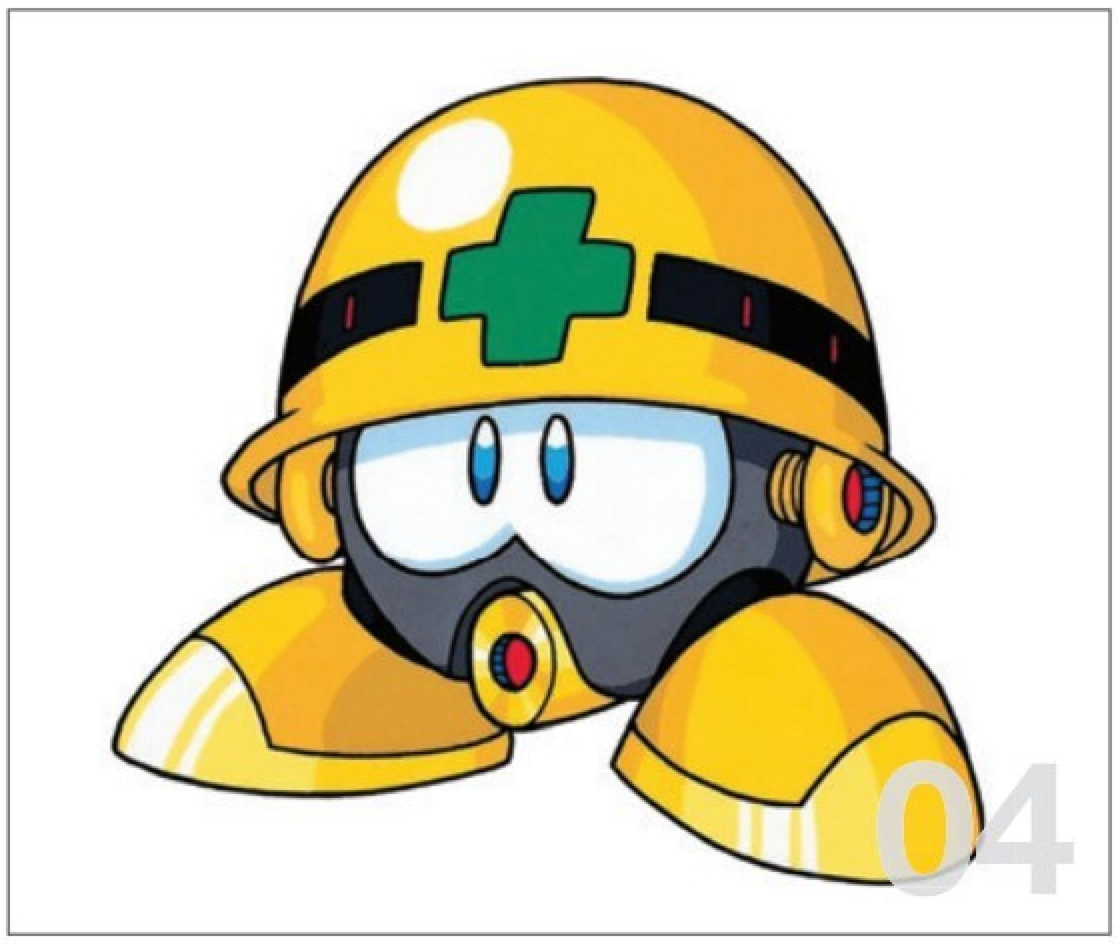
Dragon Quest's mascots look like teardrops, but we're never sad when these iconic enemies pop onscreen. We're also not surprised they've been in every Dragon Quest game to date. Just don't forget that they're smiling because they want to destroy you.



Wooper

Pokémon

They say the cutest Pokémon is the first one you ever loved. They're wrong. The cutest Pokémon is Wooper. Just look into the hollow, vacant eyes of this adorable water Pokémon and try not to feel disgusted by the weight of your own mortal shell in comparison.



Mets

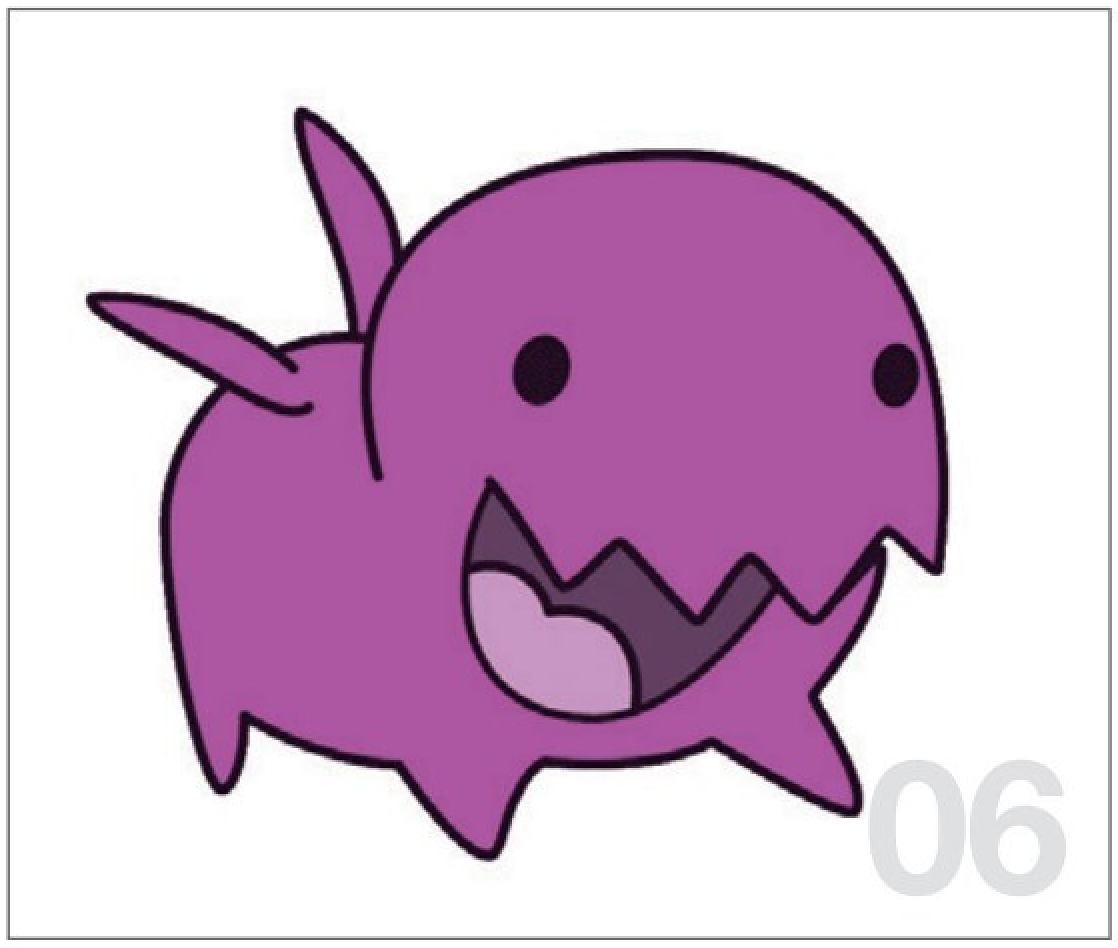
Mega Man

Mega Man's hard hat-wearing foes like to turtle up under their indestructible headgear, but we love seeing their adorable faces poke out from under their helmets like scared kittens … mostly because that makes them that much easier to destroy.

Tonberries

Final Fantasy

You know this sly Muppet reject is going to cut you. He's just taking his time. You know he's dangerous, but as he waddles toward you with his tiny knife, you can't help but smile. And suddenly you're dead because you hesitated.



Cartooned Zerglings

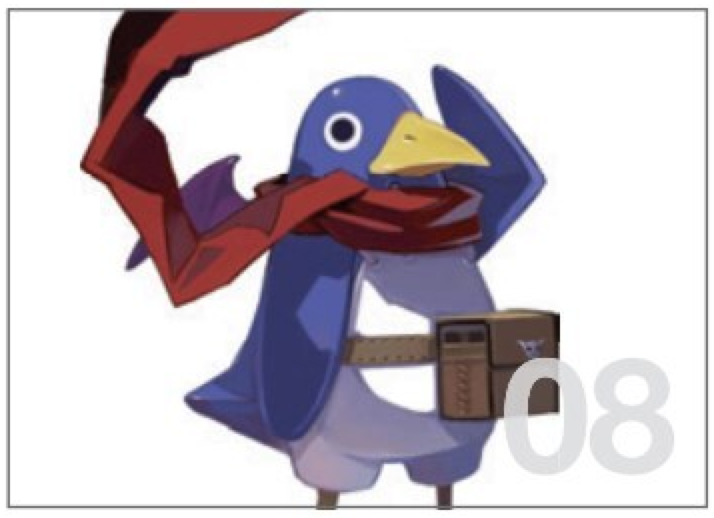
StarCraft

Zerglings were originally as ugly as a Twitter conversation on politics, but StarCraft Cartooned flipped the script and made these alien monsters into purple, alien puppies. These adorable aliens can infect our solar system whenever they want.

Goombas

Super Mario Bros.

A Goomba is the first enemy you encounter in the original Super Mario Bros., but these brown mushroom-like critters were reportedly the last enemy created for the game. Even so, we're glad they're here for us to stomp on.



Prinnies

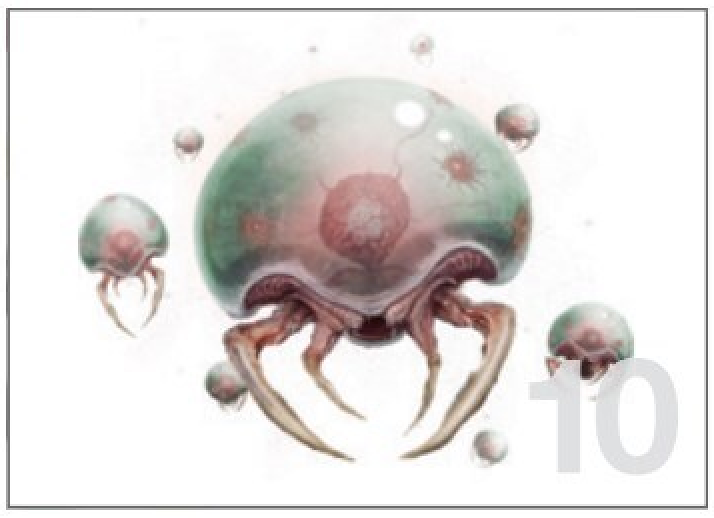
Disgaea

We're told that Prinnies tend to explode on impact because they're reincarnated souls of thieves and murderers, but they're not fooling us. These guys are just penguins! And the one thing we know about penguins is that they're Mother Nature's cutest bird.

Grunts

Halo

The Unggoy are the lowest ranking enemy in the Covenant army. We'd classify them as ugly cute because we're not eager to cuddle with these squat soldiers. Still, we can't help but crack a smile whenever they run at us with a live grenade. Aww, they think they're a real threat.



Mochtroids

Metroid

These parasitoids resemble the larval stage of genuine Metroids, but they are actually Space Pirates' failed attempt to clone the original alien parasites. Samus isn't a fan, but we are. How do we get one as a pet?

SLY AS A FOX

Nate Fox was an art student when a representative from Activision came to his school and reminded him that video game companies needed artists. That set his career off in a bold new direction, which eventually led him to Sucker Punch, where Fox had a hand in everything from Sly Cooper to Infamous. Most recently, Fox was Ghost of Tsushima's creative director, and he talked with us about the challenges of making good art and why the myth of the samurai remains so alluring.

interview by Ben Reeves

Can you talk about how you got into the games industry and the process that led you here?
I knew that video games were something I wanted to spend my life on when my mother came down into our basement and said, "You can't play this game for more than four hours a day." That was the original Legend of Zelda, and I found that time just sped up while I was exploring Hyrule. It was the most exciting experience I'd ever had as a kid. Up until that point, I'd never played a game for more than two hours but there was something about Legend of Zelda that said, "This is the most important thing in the world." I wanted to participate in and make games like that. It felt like the highest goal you could do with your time, because it was such an important experience for me personally.

But then you went to school for art. How did you transition from classical art to games?
I was taking this class, and we had a person come in from Activision to give a presentation. I started asking questions about the choices they made on MechWarrior 2, and they ended up offering me a job, actually. They brought me in to interview for a job after that conversation, because I was curious about their cross-promotion with a joystick maker and how that influenced their perspective on the gameplay. It dawned on me that you're supposed to do what you love.

Since you have an art background, did working in animation seem like a more natural fit at the time, rather than becoming a concept artist or environmental artist?
I went to art school, but I can be totally honest with you now that I am a very bad artist. I'm the guy that people would come to talk about their ideas, and I would sharpshoot 'em a little bit or give them ideas, and then the really good artists would make these fine paintings or sculptures. The only thing I did well at art school were installation art pieces, where people would walk into a sculpture that would change around them. It's kind of like video game design, it's just very low-tech video game design. My role as a game designer was founded right there in doing interactive art pieces.

How did that background help you as you transitioned into a directorial role?
The most useful thing for me as a director was definitely working in theater, because you spent a lot of time trying to improve the scene or even build a set, and the only thing that matters is the perspective of the audience. You're trying to bring something to life with not a lot of resources, and you have only so much time before the show is going to start, so you have to make choices very briskly to get the best production. The clock's ticking. That experience of putting on live theater, particularly at a young age, trains you to get good at making aesthetic evaluations on the quick and then pivoting if things don't work. Theater is a proving ground for working as a core creative in the video game industry.

Sucker Punch often gets lumped together with studios like Insomniac and Naughty Dog, because in the early days you all worked on mascot platformers. But over the years you've all slowly moved toward tackling more mature content. Why do you feel that transition happened?
A lot of the people making games today have gotten older. We have kids now. We have a wider perspective on life, so the games that get produced now are for a much more adult audience by virtue of the fact that the people making them are older. This is the kind of entertainment that we crave.

It seems like Insomniac – on some level – still likes messing around with Ratchet & Clank. Do you guys ever have a desire to go back to any of those old mascot games like Sly Cooper?
I would certainly love to make another Sly Cooper game. I missed those characters tremendously. I missed the voice actors who played those characters tremendously. But right now, it's such a pleasure to work on a samurai cinema game. To spend your days thinking about this genre, which I'm a big fan of, and to get paid to try and reproduce something that allows you to play inside that kind of world – it's exciting. I'm not ready to give up on that.

After wrapping the Infamous series, how long did it take to settle on the theme of samurai for your next project?
I put out that we should do an open-world samurai game, in large part because of a comic book that I had read. While working on the Sly Cooper series, I read *Usagi Yojimbo*, which is about anthropomorphized animals. In this case, a samurai who wanders the beautiful Japanese landscape, solving problems with his wits and the edge of his sword. I read it as research for how to create a tone with anthropomorphized characters, but it ended up being a gateway to go back and get excited about samurai-period dramas. It highlights the coolness of being able to experience wandering this lush countryside as a samurai, something that open world games just haven't done. It was an interactive experience that I wanted as a gamer. That's the sort of thing you want to make for everyone else, something that you're passionate about.

What do you think makes samurai cool? Have you distilled that down and figured out why the idea of the samurai resonates with people?
For me, and a number of people at Sucker Punch, what makes samurai a romantic ideal is that there's a nobility to them, and also a no-nonsense, "We're just going to take care of the situation," feel to them. They treat everyone they meet with respect. They get treated with respect. They have this great power to act, yet they live by a code that keeps them at a very high level of moral authority. When you watch *Seven Samurai* and you see these men willing to lay down their lives to help people in the village, you feel like they are standing at a level that you don't normally see in popular culture. Also, the natural world of feudal Japan is really beautiful. It surrounds you; it gets inside of you and it's a place that you want to be. It's a nice marriage with video games, which do such a great job at transporting you into the fantasy of being in a place and time.

With Ghost of Tsushima, did you ever feel like there was tension between being inspired by old samurai movies and also holding true to historical details?
The genesis of Ghost of Tsushima is based on a real historical event, the Mongol invasion of the island of Tsushima in 1274, but our game is not a historical reproduction. It is an original work of fiction. It's meant to capture the feeling of classic samurai films; that's really our North Star. We want to give players that interactive experience of being inside one of those films, so when we make choices about what should be in or not based on history, we angle toward what makes the most sense relative to these classic samurai films, because they are really what we're after.

Ghost of Tsushima shares a little DNA with Assassin's Creed. Is that a series you looked at during development?
The original elevator pitch was, "In order to save his island home from a Mongol invasion, a samurai must sacrifice his honor and become a new warrior," so we knew that the hero was going to start as a samurai and then transform into a ghost, and that the ghost was somebody who didn't look his enemy in the eye or fight in a very direct way. It would be something that wasn't considered correct by the samurai around him. That meant that he was going to do all sorts of sneaky assassinations. That's how those features came about. It was just sort of looking at the baseline of what it is to be a samurai and then adding degree upon degree upon degree of these dishonorable attacks. But past that, our game is really focused on this desire to create a samurai movie experience in an interactive medium. A really good example of that is the guiding wind feature, which points you in the direction of where to go but doesn't clutter up the screen with a lot of UI that takes you out of that cinematic experience. Those things led our design choices. It wasn't other games that we played while producing this product. If anything, we play other games and we think, "Oh, they did that, so we shouldn't do that."

As developers, you get to check out Sony hardware before anybody else in the world. What's the mood in the office when you receive new hardware?
New hardware is extremely exciting, as you might imagine. Your mind starts going crazy with the possibilities of what you could do with it. The people who get it first are the engineers, so they have all the fun right off the bat, and we wait for them to figure out how to make a couple prototypes that show off the power of the hardware before the designers get their hooks in too deeply. But you feel lucky. You feel very fortunate to be able to get your hands on these controllers in advance. We are game makers, and we are game players, so just like everybody else, the next generation of hardware is extremely exciting.

Competing During The Pandemic

A pro player talks about how COVID-19 has changed Overwatch League

Dusttin Bowerman goes by the name Dogman, and he plays a mean Zenyatta for the Atlanta Reign, one of Overwatch League's better teams this season. In his second year in the league, Dogman has seen the competitive events shift from being held in front of roaring fans in an arena to the hum of an air conditioner in his apartment. Despite a different approach to matches, the league continues to find success and deliver impressive shows of player skill, but there are a number of drawbacks.

interview by Andrew Reiner

First off, how do you get started in Overwatch League?
Right out of high school I started playing Overwatch. I was about 18 at the time, and I was trying to do some college to stay at home with my parents. Eventually I moved out and tried to make [Overwatch] a full-time thing within a year. I got picked up by the Atlanta Reign academy team. After a pretty good season in Contenders, I got called up to the Overwatch League team.

You got a taste of being on the stage to experience the true vision of the league, and now the shocking blow of the pandemic. Can you talk to me about the moment where you realized everything was going to change?
I kind of realized it at the Washington homestand. That was the last homestand before they were all shut down. It was where COVID-19 was getting more notice, and people were paying more attention to it. A lot of the fans that usually would have been [in the arena] weren't there. They were like, "I don't want to go there and get this virus that is pretty deadly." That event was lacking in terms of attendance. It was there where I realized that audiences might not exist as we moved forward.

What was the communication behind the scenes between your teammates and people from the league?
People at the start were happy. They were like, "Oh, we don't have to travel. It's nice that we don't have to go anywhere." But the league also told us we wouldn't do homestands anymore. It was pretty direct communication. After a while, some of our players were like, "I wish we were traveling again to our events." Meeting fans makes it more unique and a more enjoyable experience.

The transition brought about a lot of questions of whether a league like this could be played from a distance, given the internet being an unpredictable beast.
No one knew what was happening. We were all like, "How are we going to play these games? Are they going to cancel the league entirely?" For multiplayer games, it's a lot easier to set up the competition than other sports since it's online and digital anyway.

What checks and balances were put in place to make sure the competition was even and fair?
The league has a person who shows up like 30 minutes before a game to check your computer. They have a digital device and they take control of your computer to check your files. On top of that, during the week you have to download a new update for a build of the game. I imagine the update makes it harder to cheat. It also removes bugs and stuff like that. They have a lot of precautions in place to make sure we don't have anything open on our computer that we shouldn't, and doing what they can to make it a fair game.

Everyone has to have the same ping, right? How are they handling that given the distance between the teams?
The ping is a difficult part of it. Originally, everyone [from the Atlanta Reign] was in the apartment complex that we live at in Atlanta, but we picked up a few players who don't want to travel due to COVID-19. They don't want to move given the season is only a few months longer. Our new pickup, LR1S, he lives in Korea so he's on high ping.

Has the higher ping created issues?
Yeah. Of course. In any video game it sucks to be playing on high ping because it makes it like everything is a delayed reaction. It's very hard to compete on that. You can get used to it.

Do you change your tactics for that?
You can't change what it is. Me and him are competing for the starting spot. I'm on low ping and he's on high ping, so it makes it a little easier for me.

You said you are in the team apartment. What kind of safety protocols does the league have in place for players?
We can go out, but Atlanta is pretty lax with what you have to do. We do have to wear masks when we are out. People in Atlanta haven't been good about it. There are still a lot of people who unfortunately walk around without masks.

Talk to me about the different flow for the league? The tournaments in particular.
I like the new structure. Call of Duty League also has a tournament every week and I think that's a good format. The tournaments add more pressure and stakes every week. I think that's a good format to do weekly. Get rid of the need to play matches every week for the season and just do a tournament. That's a fun and fine idea.

And what's your take on the state of Overwatch overall?
Genji was a little overtuned, but they nerfed him. There are some characters that always need changing. At this point, you can't really fault [Blizzard].

THE WONDERFUL WISDOM OF JENNIFER HALE

You may know her best as the voice behind Mass Effect's iconic Commander Shepard, or more recently as rebellious gunslinger Ashe in Overwatch, but Jennifer Hale is one of the most versatile and accomplished voice actors around, with over 100 credits to her name. She was even recognized by Guinness World Records as the most prolific video game voice actress. Now Hale is ready for a new challenge: audio books. Hale is narrating To Sleep in a Sea of Stars, from Eragon's international bestselling author, Christopher Paolini, which launches on September 15. We caught up with Hale to look back on her career and discuss the upcoming book, and she left us with some valuable life lessons in the process. ***by Kimberley Wallace and Alex Stadnik***

What's been your most challenging role?
This book? [*To Sleep in a Sea of Stars*] was incredibly challenging, because I've never done an audio book before. And for the first one I ever did, [it] was almost 900 pages and had 50 different characters! I have a whole stack of voice memos in my phone that are all the characters from this project, because they disappear for 50 pages, or 100 pages or 200 pages, and then they come back. And then I have to [think], "Oh yeah, how does that one sound?" I had to keep it true to form.

There are a couple of roles that I've done that are super hard, like I'm the stunt Dory. Whenever Ellen [Degeneres] is too busy, I'm Dory. She's so good at Dory, so it's super intimidating to go in and be Dory. I have to say Dory is one of my favorite characters ever because, yeah, I think that's how I figured out I might be ADD.

I also played a character in God of War: Ascension. This was a mocap gig. I was Alecto. I was so villainous in that one, and I love being villains. Villains always believe they're doing the right thing. They just have a different definition of what the right thing is to everybody else and they think they're miles ahead of everyone. But with her, she traded on her sexuality and that's not in my comfort zone. Chris Zimmerman was phenomenal in her direction of that. I found that intimidating, but very little else bothers me. I long ago got past that thing of making a fool of myself. I'm like, "That's my job!"

And you found a way to do it and for it to be acceptable!
No, I stopped caring if it's acceptable. Yeah, in order for one to really express oneself and to live one's life to the fullest of one's soul, you got to stop caring about that stuff. You get one shot. Don't piss it away worrying about what people think!

FemShep really struck a chord with people. Can you discuss the importance of that role? Do you embrace it, or has it been hard to step outside of being so associated with being FemShep and Mass Effect?
I'm honored that I'm associated with being FemShep from Mass Effect. There's so much about it that I love. Number one: the writing was incredible. The project was amazing, and I'm insanely grateful that I got to do that. I am honored that it touched people the way it did. I throw my heart and soul into everything; just with that one, things aligned so beautifully. It was an incredible experience and it went on for several years. So, I evolved, the character evolved, the technology evolved, and acting and games evolved all at the same time.

There's a notion that I really live in and work by, which is when you're in touch with the highest and best part of yourself and you bring that to your work, it will go out over the waves and hopefully connect with the highest and best parts of other people. Not in a preachy way, but just like the vibe is there. And I hope the vibe reaches out and gives people what they need, whatever that is. That is a project where I feel like that really came together.

Plus, getting to break the glass ceiling. You know, like having the words that the male and female character say be identical. It was so beautifully timed for where the world was evolving to, and now it's taken that evolution to the next step. Now it's a given; it's expected. It's frowned upon if it's not there. Representation is happening more and more, and I'm insanely proud to be on that train. I will always love that. I'm nothing but honored by FemShep and Mass Effect.

Did you have more fun playing Renegade or Paragon in Mass Effect?
Good question. I always say, people may have heard this: Paragon Shepard is who I wish I was and Renegade is what I wish I could say. It's fun to say that stuff. It's fun to like, tear things apart and just like throw it all away. It's just like, "Screw it." It's the epitome of what I just said a minute ago, you get one shot, don't waste it. I have to say some of my favorite stuff was the more absurd stuff like *Powerpuff Girls*. I got to play a character called Princess Morbucks, and she's psychotic. I loved doing that character. It started out I'd have like a paragraph of stuff she'd say, and then after a few episodes, they'd write me like a page and a half rant. I finished one of those, and [voice actor] Tom Kenny looks over, pokes me in the arm, and goes, "You're red all the way to here!" I was like, "Uh huh, and I'm so calm now."

Who would you have romanced as FemShep?
[In FemShep voice:] Don't make me pick.

I will say, I remember we were doing the goodbyes, and the Garrus goodbyes, and I had trouble getting through them. It's funny, it reminds me of doing the book, *To Sleep In A Sea of Stars*. There were four points toward the end of the book where I had to stop because it got me. Those are the ones that I remember. When we were doing Mass Effect and the Garrus [goodbye], I had to stop and Carolyn Livingstone was directing that day remotely from Edmonton and I was in L.A.. And I got choked up and I thought, "Shepard does not cry!" So I took a minute, stuffed it down, said what I needed, or said what was on the page. And I was waiting. Carolyn would normally come back on and go, "Okay, we're going to take A or B, or we're going to do it again." And there was dead silence. I was like, "Oh, did we lose the connection? What happened?" I said, "Caroline?" I heard, "Yeah. Hold on." I was like, "Yes! It got her too!"

Has the depth of the roles of the female characters you're offered changed throughout the years from when you started your career?
The depth and the clothes. They actually get clothes that would cover them in battle, which is really cool. And they're not falling out of their upper armor, which is fantastic, because as a woman, that's really annoying. [laughs]

But yes, women as leaders, women as knowledgeable scientific professionals, women as people coping with life, women as incidental characters. I always advocate and I am going to do it right now: Every writer, every producer, every director, every casting professional out there, unless somebody is talking specifically about their anatomy, take the gender off. It's a human being. Open the gates. You will be delightfully surprised. That includes things like the parents of the kid, and in the scene, maybe it's the dad, because we have so many dads now taking on [that] time. I don't want to do to men what was done to women. We absolutely need to level the playing field, but I don't want to leave the men behind because we were left behind. We are all better than that now, and it's not time for that anymore. We're all going to find a spot because there's plenty of room.

You can watch our full unabridged interview at gameinformer.com

A Thriving Homestead

How Stardew Valley Keeps Building On Success

Stardew Valley released on PC in 2016, captivating players with its idyllic vision of simple farm life. In the four years since, the game has been ported to consoles and mobile, and sold more than 10 million copies across all platforms. However, the success of this relaxing retro simulation isn't a past phenomenon – it's an ongoing effort. Since launch, developer Eric Barone (aka ConcernedApe) has continued creating significant updates for Stardew Valley, improving and expanding the gameplay and story without charging players anything extra.

by Joe Juba

In today's gaming landscape, post-launch updates are common; studios release patches to fix bugs, as well as add new features or content. But even considering those practices, what Barone is doing with Stardew Valley is exceptional. He has given the project years of sustained support, refining the experience even after all of the acclaim it received at release.

"It wasn't until the game came out and most people loved it that I was like, 'Okay, I guess the game is actually good,' but that's kind of how I am," Barone says. "I always have doubt about whether it's good. I always think it's bad. But I actually think that is a tool to my benefit, because it compels me to always go above and beyond and keep trying. I want it to be perfect, because I always feel like it's not good enough."

Past updates have included a variety of major and minor tweaks, including new farm buildings to buy and upgrade, additional romantic interests to marry, and more annual festivals to celebrate. However, the single biggest new feature was the addition of multiplayer, which allows four people to play together cooperatively. "[Multiplayer] was something that I had promised originally – that was one of the big selling points," Barone says. "I had to make the hard decision to release it without multiplayer and patch it in later … Thankfully, now multiplayer is in, and the promise has been kept. That was a big relief."

If co-op isn't your thing, you aren't left out in the cold. One of the great things about Stardew Valley is how it accommodates a breadth of playstyles. If you are mainly interested in making money for better upgrades, you can pursue that loop. If you love the life-simulation angle and want to befriend all the townspeople, that's another option. When determining what changes to pursue in any update, Barone tries to balance the needs of all kinds of players. He compares the process to preparing a meal: "You can't just have the

The Future Of Stardew Valley

What lies ahead for Stardew Valley remains to be seen. Creator Eric Barone has always taken the game's development one step at a time; he is currently working on the 1.5 update, which will release at an unannounced point in the future. After that, he will assess the best path forward.

"I'm not willing to commit to Stardew Valley 1.6," he says. "I will say that I definitely love Stardew Valley. I love it as a world and a universe. I don't think [1.5] will be the end of Stardew Valley. I would not be surprised if there's another Stardew Valley update, or multiple updates, or a Stardew Valley 2. Who knows? There's isn't currently a Stardew Valley 2; after 1.5, I'll decide what the next step for Stardew Valley is. But I would say there will probably be another step for Stardew Valley. In the meantime, I'm also working on a couple of new projects – solo projects – so I have plenty to do."

meat; you also have the potatoes, and the salad beforehand, to make a perfect meal. And then it all needs a lot of sauce on top, and salt. If you don't have all that, it's not going to be good." In short, a good update needs something in every category: end-game activities for experienced players, engaging content for new players, and quality-of-life changes for everyone.

For example, the most recent 1.4 update included a clothes-tailoring system, new hairstyles for your character, a "trash bear" that demands specific items and only appears after the second in-game year, a new farm map with co-op in mind, and much more. It's a lot of varied content, and because it's all free for people who own the game, you can always come back to Stardew Valley after time away and find something new. And if you can't find it yourself, the vast repository of fan-curated information online can point you in the right direction.

Stardew Valley has a passionate and positive community, and Barone has a good sense of the kinds of things players want to see added to the game. However, it's not a majority-rules scenario. He developed Stardew Valley himself, and though other team members have worked on the game since launch, he still views it as a personal project. "I think of the community like advisors," Barone says. "They're giving suggestions, but ultimately, I want it to come from me. I feel like if the game was just ruled by committee, it wouldn't be Stardew Valley anymore. I try to accommodate the fans as much as I can, but there certain things where I feel like, even if it's a popular request, it's not what I want to do."

More marriage candidates and more options with your kids are two common suggestions, but implementing either of them carries different complications. Time is at a premium for such a small development team, and creating all of the necessary dialogue and scenes for marriage candidates requires an enormous amount of work. "If could just push a button, and it would do that all perfectly, then I would make many more of the characters marriage candidates," Barone says.

For the kids, that situation veers into uncertain territory when it comes to how players see themselves in the world. The main character is intentionally left with an undefined personality, so players can more easily insert themselves into the events and setting. Strong, pre-defined characteristics and dialogue can make you feel like an observer rather than a participant. "When it comes to your own children, I feel like it's the same thing," Barone says. "It needs to be left vague, or it will run into that problem."

Stardew Valley can't possibly include everything every player wants, but you merely need to look at the notes for any update to see the huge list of things that are regularly added to the game. It's an uncommonly generous approach in an industry full of microtransactions and season passes, but it also feels consistent with Stardew Valley's considerate and wholesome tone. "I know it sounds like I'm just saying this, but I really do care about the fans, and I want to make them happy," Barone says. "There's a whole Stardew Valley community that loves the game, and I don't want them to stop loving the game. People ask, 'Why don't you charge for the updates?' But in a way, people are paying for the updates with their appreciation and love for Stardew Valley." ◆

by Ben Reeves

OFFICE SPACE

The best gear to elevate your home office

1

Herman Miller x Logitech G Embody Gaming Chair

Office chairs aren't cheap, but you spend about as much time in these seats as you do your bed, so they better be comfortable. Computer peripheral manufacturer Logitech teamed up with one of the leaders in office furniture, Herman Miller, to produce an ergonomic office chair with gamers in mind. The Embody has a host of adjustability options that help support your spine, encourage healthy movement, and cushion the parts of your body that matter most.

OUTSTANDING ■■■■■■■■■■

$1,495 | store.hermanmiller.com

2

Uplift Curved Corner Standing Desk

Standing desks can reduce back pain, improve your mood, and increase your overall energy. And, if you're working from home, you don't need to listen to your coworkers mock you for standing all day. Uplift makes some of the best standing desks on the market, but we're fond of its curved corner design, which is incredibly customizable. Not only can you design the look of your desk – picking everything from solid carbonized tops to natural wood finishes – but you can outfit your workspace with an array of handy accessories such as bamboo organizers, wire-management kits, CPU-tower holders, and under-desk hammocks.

Starting at $1,179 | upliftdesk.com

3

Ember Mug²

You need powerful fuel to propel you through the workday, but nothing is worse than room-temperature coffee. Ember's built-in batteries allow your favorite beverage to maintain a consistent temperature for up to 1.5 hours. Better yet, you can use Ember's mobile app to select your ideal temperature. These 10 oz mugs can even be submerged in up to one meter in water, making them easy to clean.

SUPERB ■■■■■■■■■□

$99 | ember.com

4

Negative Suit Spider-Man Statue

Productivity rises when you're surrounded by interesting objects, and few objects are more interesting than this statue of Spider-Man. Based on the black-and-white suit that Mister Negative designed in Insomniac's 2018 Spider-Man game, this statue measures approximately 10 inches tall and comes packaged in a full-color window box to provide a little pop to the monochrome display.

$49 | shop.diamondselecttoys.com

5

Gunnar Lightning Bolt 360 Glasses

By this point, you're probably well aware of the dangers of blue light, but a lot of eyewear designed to protect you from computer-vision syndrome is uncomfortable. Gunnar's new line of Lightning Bolt 360 eyewear is specifically designed to alleviate temple pressure while wearing a gaming headset. These glasses even come with interchangeable lens for indoor/outdoor use and can be made to match your prescription.

$129 | gunnar.com

Media Shelf

A BEAUTIFULLY FOOLISH ENDEAVOR: A NOVEL BY HANK GREEN

From the number-one *New York Times* best-selling author of *An Absolutely Remarkable Thing* comes this follow-up story about a group of friends who discover a set of mysterious books that seem to predict the future.

$27.00

penguinrandomhouse.com

MYTHIC ODYSSEYS OF THEROS

Whether you want to play new races like centaurs and satyrs or wield the weapons of the gods, this new D&D setting focuses on legendary adventures inspired by Greek mythology. It's a perfect change of pace from the standard medieval fantasy.

$29.97

dnd.wizards.com

THE SANDMAN AUDIOBOOK

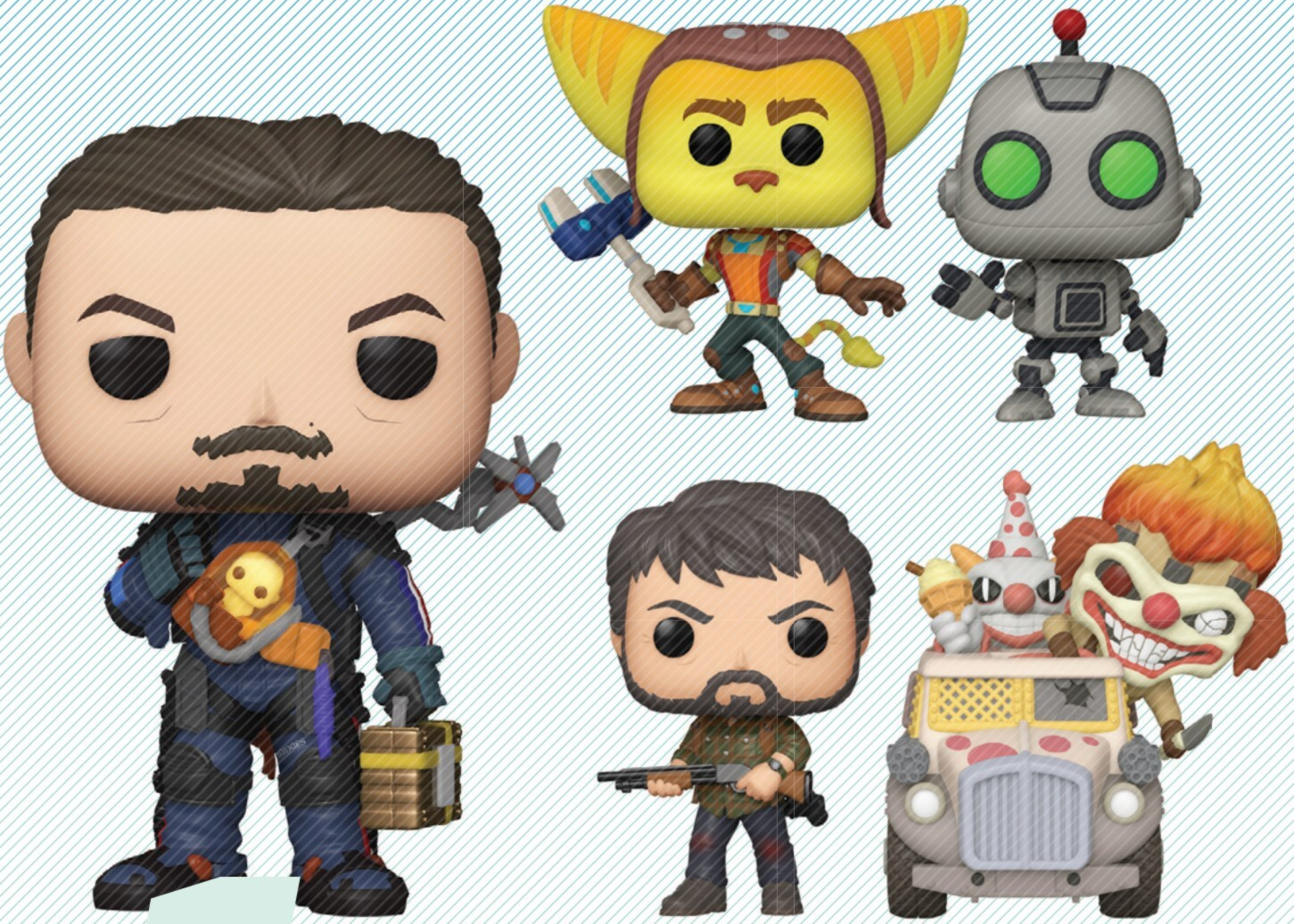
Vertigo's *The Sandman* is one of the most beloved comic books of all time, but it's hard to read while driving a car. For the first time ever, this evocative and imaginative fantasy series about the immortal king of the dreamscape has been brought to the audio format.

$24.49

audible.com

COLLECTIBLES FOR THE SHELVES

by Andrew Reiner



1

PLAYSTATION FUNKO POPS: SERIES 2

The second wave of iconic PlayStation characters to be immortalized as Funko Pops brings back a face we all want to see in a new game. Sweet Tooth of Twisted Metal fame is the centerpiece of this series and he comes with his creepy ice cream truck. Funko is also making sure Ratchet & Clank fans get both heroes at once with a two-pack that keeps this duo united. The wave also features Sam Porter from Death Stranding (complete with a BB), and a variant version of Joel from The Last of Us. All of these Pops release on October 5.

Price varies by figure | funko.com

2

TRANSFORMERS SCORPONOK

Hasbro's long-running line of Transformers Generations: War for Cybertron action figures is all about scale. You can collect little cars that fit into the palm of your hand or struggle to find a shelving unit that will hold a giant Decepticon like Scorponok, one of the tallest figures yet. This 21-inch toy transforms three ways, from robot to scorpion to base, and comes with 11 accessories, including minifigures.

$159 | hasbro.com

BATMAN: ARKHAM ASYLUM FIGURES

The battle between Batman and the Joker was brilliantly told in Rocksteady Studios' Batman: Arkham games. McFarlane Toys is taking a look back at that series in a new line of figures, beginning with Batman and Joker. These seven-inch figures are highly articulated and come with a number of accessories, such as Joker's chattering teeth. Here's hoping McFarlane releases a second wave with more villains. ◆

$26.99 | mcfarlanetoys.com

3

STAR WARS™
THE BLACK SERIES
THE BLACK SERIES GAMING GREATS
SCAN HERE FOR MORE GAMING GREATS
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Disney
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» **PLATFORM**
PS5 • PS4 • PC

» **STYLE**
1-Player Action

» **PUBLISHER**
Ember Lab

» **DEVELOPER**
Ember Lab

» **RELEASE**
Holiday

CROSSI

NG OVER

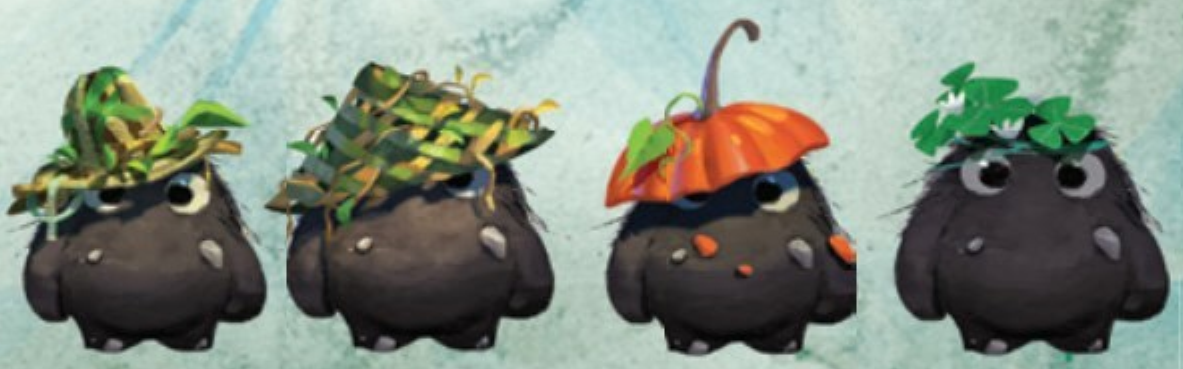
KENA: BRIDGE OF SPIRITS *tells a gorgeous tale about helping restless spirits move on, while also helping to usher in the transition to PlayStation 5*

by **JEFF CORK**

Sony's PlayStation 5 reveal event may have taken place online instead of on a traditional E3 stage, but that didn't dim viewer enthusiasm. The livestream featured first looks and next-gen gameplay from some of the biggest names in gaming, including Horizon, Spider-Man, Ratchet & Clank, and Gran Turismo. Nestled amid those heavy hitters was something small and unexpected, but no less exciting.

Introduced by brothers Josh and Mike Grier, Kena: Bridge of Spirits transported viewers to a gorgeously animated world filled with lush forests, frightening foes, and a cluster of helpful creatures known collectively as the Rot. Kena was one of the standouts of the show; in addition to piquing our interest, the reveal of Ember Lab's first big game left us with plenty of questions. And now, we have answers.

Kena: Bridge of Spirits is the result of years of passionate development from the indie studio, including collaborations with talented artists and musicians from across the globe. Ember Lab was built as a family business, and that mindset has carried it to this point. Over the following pages, we explore how a pair of brothers got here, learn about Kena's fascinating development, and hear what it's like to be one of the first teams building a game on Sony's long-awaited PlayStation 5. It's been a long journey, and it's only just beginning.



GROWING UP DISNEY

The Grier brothers had remarkable childhoods. Their father worked for The Walt Disney Company, where he was an executive for the company's theme-park operations. For the brothers, that meant traveling the world starting at a young age. When Josh was six, he says his dad was part of the opening team for Euro Disney, so his family moved to Paris for 18 months. His brother Mike, who was four at the time, says: "That's probably what allowed us to work together now. Because one year of traveling when you don't know the language, you can be mad at each other as much as you want, but if you don't have any other friends you're out of luck." Those formative years were also spent with a hobby that would eventually change the course of their lives. "We couldn't watch TV because we didn't understand it, so we just played a lot of video games," Josh says.

Moving back to the United States didn't dim their interest in gaming. "We'd save our lunch money as middle schoolers and pool it together to buy these games that we wanted to play," Mike says. "It's really what binds us together as brothers. It's something we've always done together, playing the new Zelda or the new Metroid or whatever it was. We always did it together."

Years later, when Mike was in high school and Josh was away at college, his dad was tapped to be the vice president of Tokyo Disney. "Our influences with that culture were mostly through games and anime like a lot of people," Mike says. "But being able to live there and experience and soak it up and get immersed in the culture was a big part of what I wanted to do while I was over there. That was a big influence on me, creatively."

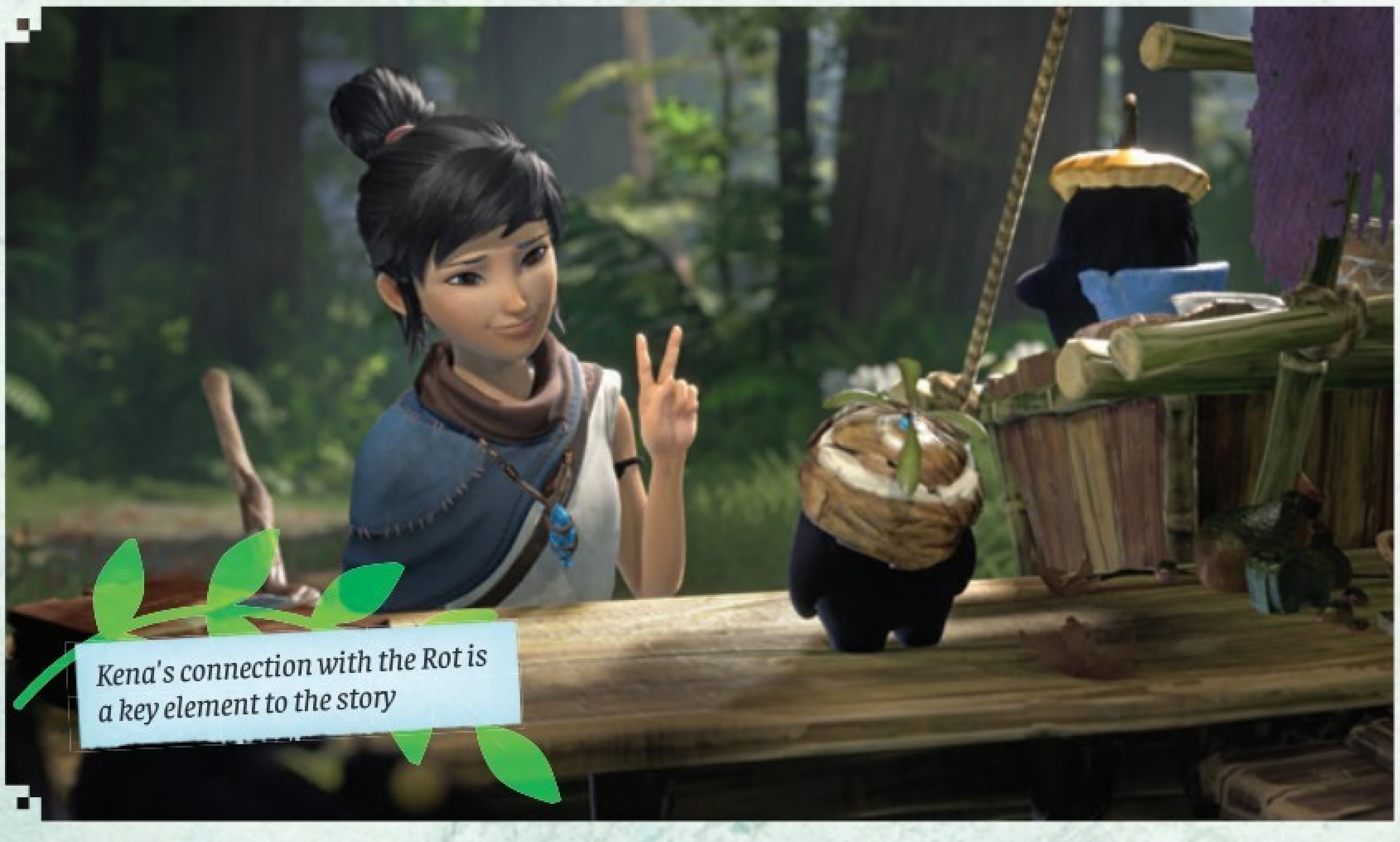
Mike eventually went to film school at Chapman University, while Josh studied business and economics at Northwestern. Josh says that working together wasn't something that they'd planned on pursuing, but that his interest in business was a great match for Mike's visual effects and filmmaking skills. The pair formed the creative agency Ember Lab, with Josh filling the role of chief operating officer and Mike being the company's chief creative officer.

Ember Lab eventually gained a reputation in the industry and a client list that included Coca-Cola, Major League Baseball, and KFC. In addition to creating traditional television ads, the brothers seized opportunities they were given a decade ago while working on a spot for Coca-Cola's Chinese market. "We knew we wanted something different from a traditional marketing film, and we pitched them on the idea of a small game to go along with the commercial that we were already creating," Mike says. "It was kind of a little bit selfish, because we knew that we wanted to get into that direction, but they really liked the idea and that was our first introduction into actually making a game. So we made a couple of smaller mobile games for them. It was nothing on this scale, but it was a good stepping stone that got our feet wet."

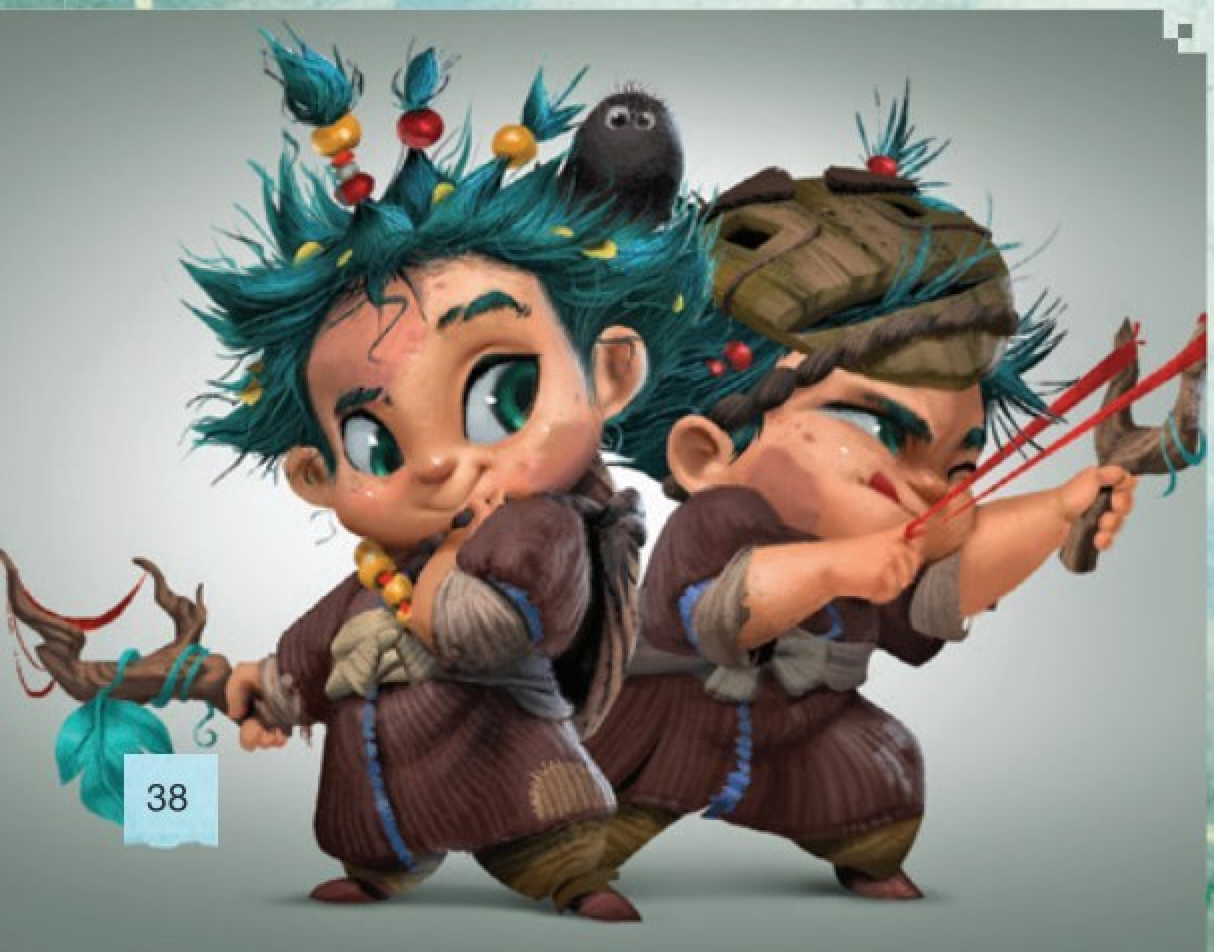
Josh, Mike, and the team at Ember Lab worked on commercial projects, while also finding time for creative side projects. One such project was filming an independent short sci-fi film called *Dust*, which they filmed on location in Japan and finished after a successful Kickstarter campaign.

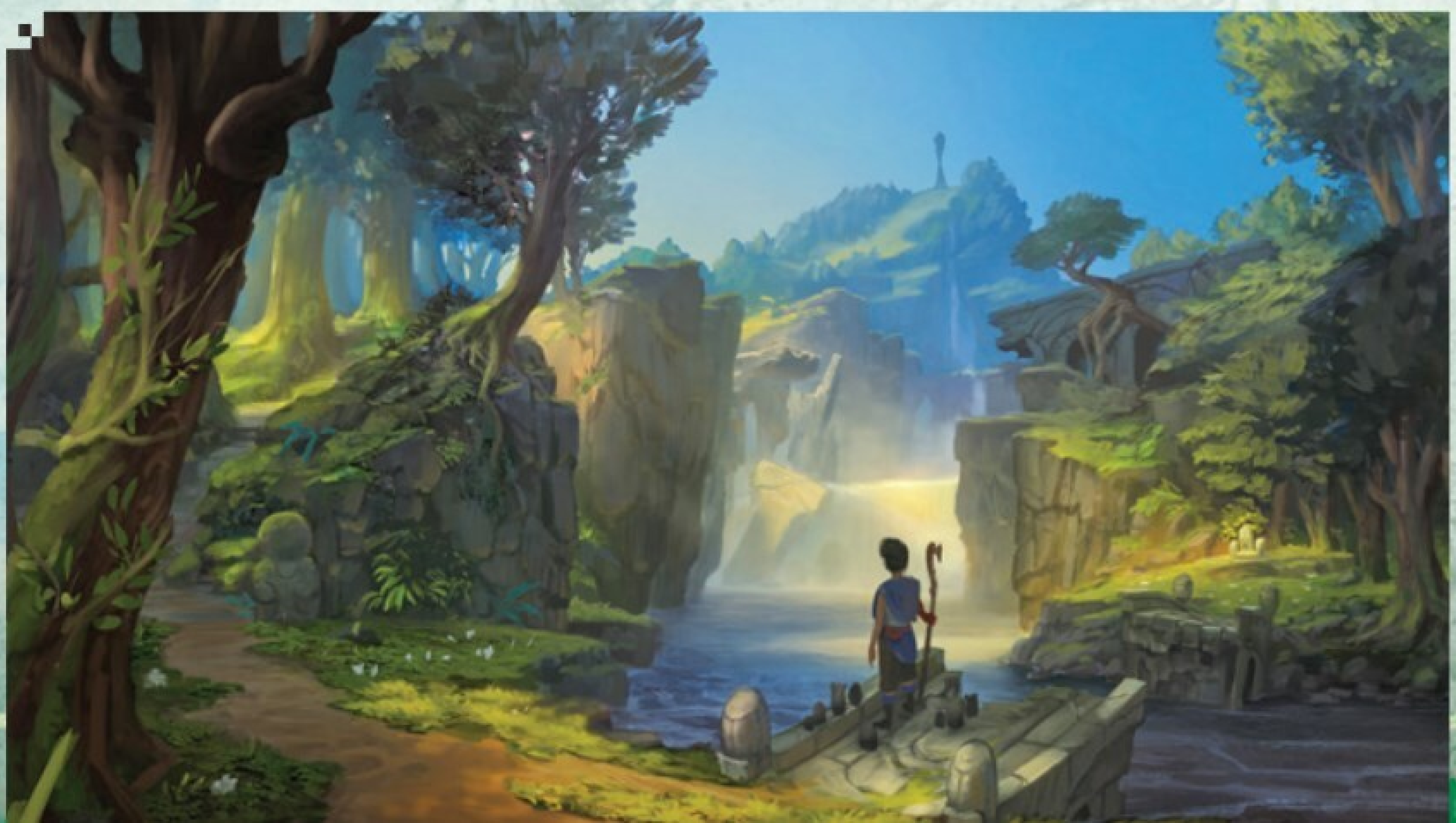
"We were always creating something, and that's when we were creating Kena in the background," Josh says. "It wasn't called that when we started. It was the same process; 'Let's get this commercial gig and we'll work on this and siphon off a month in between projects to work on this here and there.'"

"We knew that we wanted to tell stories and were interested in a lot of things, but we were actually developing the story early on without a clear idea of what it was going to be," recalls Hunter Schmidt, animation director at Ember Lab. "We weren't even sure that it was a game. I remember developing the masks and exploring Kena's design, and we didn't know what it was going to be. 'Is it a short film?' 'No, that's not quite right.'"



Kena's connection with the Rot is a key element to the story





KENA'S ADVENTURE BEGINS

I was already excited to get a demo for Kena: Bridge of Spirits, and then I learned something that bumped that excitement up several notches: I'd be seeing the game running on actual PlayStation 5 hardware. Even though we're only a few months away from the console's release, Sony has been releasing details in an agonizingly slow drip of information. Now was my chance to get a sense of some of what this machine could actually do in a live demo.

We start at the PS5's menu screen. Before I can see too much, Mike moves over to the Kena icon, selects it, and presses "play." Two seconds later, we're in the game. "That's the load," Josh says, perhaps sensing my astonishment. "They have a whole thing set up where you can do transitions, and it's very nice, but frankly it doesn't have time to play the animation," he adds. "It just loads the game so fast."

Similarly, Ember Lab doesn't waste a lot of time getting into the action. After a brief introduction that sets up a culture that places importance on masks and the role of spirit guides (don't worry, I'll get to all that soon), we then cut close to Kena (pronounced "Kay-nuh") as she kneels in a dark chamber. She stands and illuminates the area with a piercing blue crystal mounted on the end of her wooden staff. Despite a faint shaft of light coming from unseen heights, we're surrounded by inky blackness. Kena crosses her arms in front of her and is enveloped by a glowing blue bubble – her pulse ability – which serves several important roles.

"It's kind of like your probe to the world," Josh says. "It allows you to get the environment to react to give you clues, but it's also connected to Kena's shield as well. Sure enough, when she releases the ball of energy it explodes in a dazzling lightshow that temporarily illuminates her surroundings. Countless pinpoints of blue light highlight a path forward, a galaxy coaxing her to proceed further.

She ventures onward, and I see why this pulse is such a useful ability. In one area, she uses it to power up a pair of shrines, which open a passageway once both are lit. "Part of the lore of this community and this world is that this energy flows through roots and natural circuitry, and that's what makes Kena unique," Mike says. "She has this ability to tap into that, to see the flow and also to energize it to get it going again."

It's also a shield, as I see in combat. Several constructs of wood and stone spring to life, attacking Kena without provocation. When she activates the pulse and holds it, enemy attacks damage the bubble instead of harming her. It's not invulnerable, and once its separate health meter ticks away, Kena is open to direct attacks. Still, it's a great way to prevent damage, and can even be used to stagger enemies when activated just as their hits would otherwise connect. On offense, she's able to damage these corrupted creatures with her staff, incorporating light and heavy attacks, as well as some simple combos to add a few flourishes to combat.

After a few minutes of fighting and solving puzzles, Kena emerges into a thick forest. It's obvious that she's not alone in this journey, but thankfully not everyone is out to clobber her. We spy a pair of adorable-looking tots who are preoccupied with catching a strange little creature. The critter tries to sneak past them by hiding behind a leaf, but it's no use. They chase him around and he bounces away, hiding under a log. The children now turn their attention over to Kena, who waves shyly at the duo. The girl looks startled, and drags her brother behind her before vanishing into thin air. Curiously, they each had masks on their backs, carved in the likeness of fox cubs. These are Saiya and Beni, and they play an important role in Kena's journey.

"Basically, the spirit that you help in each world has family members or friends that are integrated into their struggles," Mike says. "Every character that you interact with in the game is a spirit. These first two that you saw here are actually the siblings of the troubled spirit that you need to help."

Before Kena can help them, we're introduced to one of the most endearing parts of Kena: Bridge of Spirits, and one of the things that viewers latched on to when they saw the game's reveal trailer.

An Adventure, Not A Massive Epic

Ember Lab's chief operating officer says that he's run into a problem that many older gamers have encountered. "We really want a rich experience, but we were finding ourselves daunted by these 100-hour, or even 40-hour experiences. When we set out to make this game, we were targeting ourselves a little bit; we wanted to have that feeling of an immersive, awesome world experience, but on a smaller scale."

While Kena: Bridge of Spirits has plenty of things to collect and places to explore, the team wanted to make something with a critical path that could be completed in a weekend. Chief creative officer Mike Grier says his team is small, and they wanted to make sure that they were delivering an enjoyable and polished experience. "It's intentionally not as sprawling and massive as I think a lot of other games are."

"I think our price point will reflect that," Josh adds. "It's not going to be a $60 title. And that's okay – that's what we wanted to do and set out to do, and Sony was behind that from the beginning."

You can customize your growing Rot crew with unlockable (and potentially lore-bending) hats

MEET THE ROT

That fellow who was doing his best to hide from the kids is one member of a collective known as the Rot. He and his cohorts will also play an important role, but as we saw, recruiting them may not be easy.

I see a wisp-like apparition in the clearing, which darts away when Kena approaches. It moves from a log to a rock, staying just out of reach all the while. Kena gets as close as she can and then pulses, which knocks the wisp into the air. While it floats down, she taps her staff on the ground and the creature materializes again, using a leaf to slowly descend onto the forest carpet. It sizes Kena up with wide-eyed curiosity, and climbs up her leg. She rubs under his chin, and he seems to love it. With that, he hops onto her shoulder and we now have a companion.

"This first Rot that you collect is kind of unique and ends up being the leader of the group," Josh says. "He kind of rests on Kena's shoulder as she's running around and they have a special connection. He's always going to be pointing out things for Kena to do throughout the game, so he's a really helpful character and is our character embodiment of the whole group of Rot, because all the rest of the Rot look similar except for size differences, so we really wanted to put some personality on him."

Now that we have our first Rot, the entire mood of the game seems to shift. The soundtrack becomes more lively and cheerful, with bright woodwinds and bamboo percussion. Now that we're far from those first caves, we can finally appreciate how nice everything all looks, too. Even though this part of the forest has long been neglected, with ruins and overgrown foliage, it's a warm and inviting place to explore.

Other wisps appear, which Kena can recruit as additional Rot companions. Soon, she has a small army of followers trailing behind. They're not just there to provide comic relief, either; I get a sense of their utility when Kena's path is blocked by a wall that's beyond even the reach of her double jump. She's able to enlist the Rots' help, directing them to a nearby stone that they transport to a convenient jumping spot. And yes, Kena can hop onto the stone and have them carry her around like she's on a parade float.

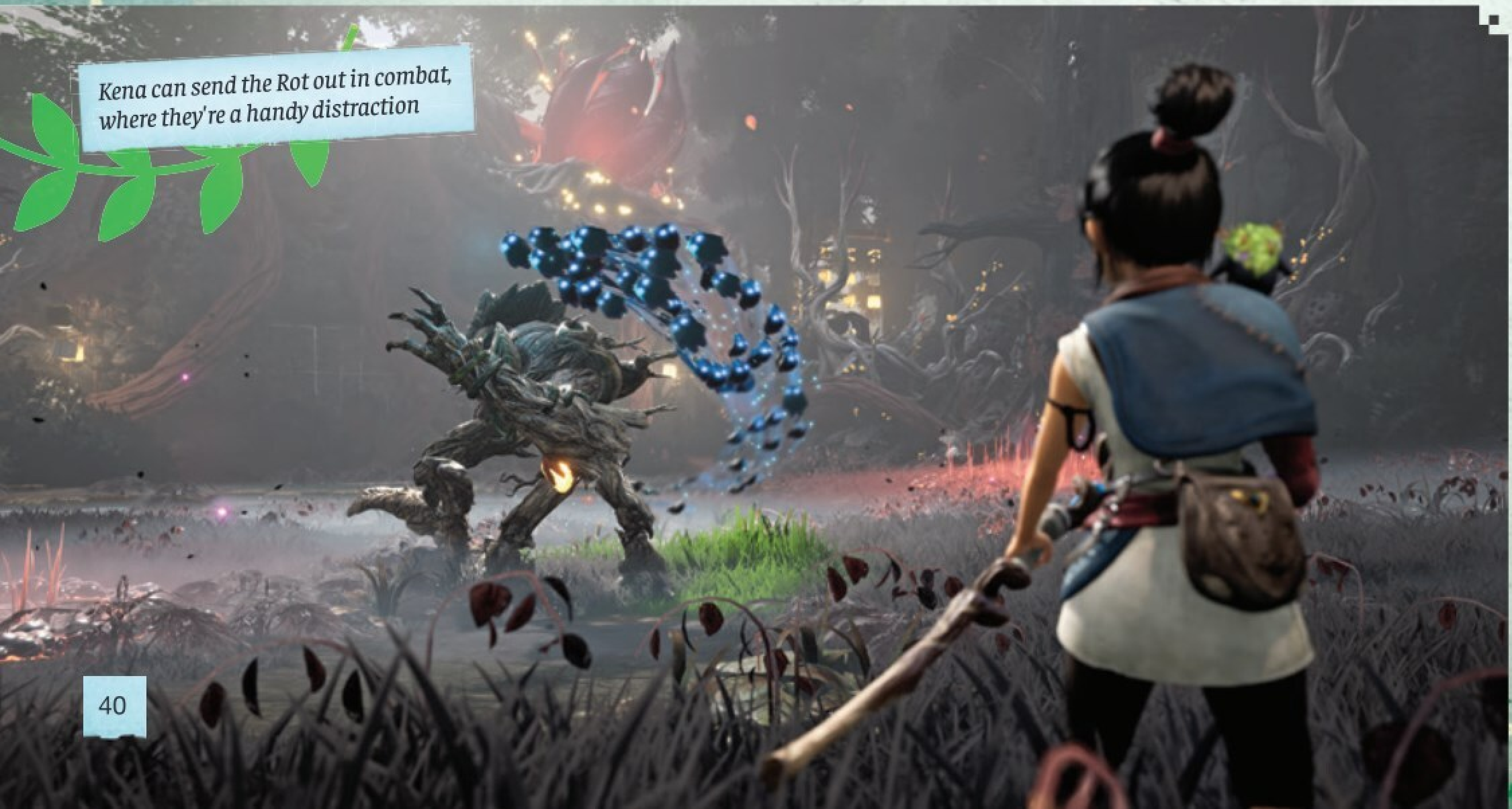
"And the Rot are permanent," Mike says, preemptively cutting off some concerns that you may be having. "As you collect them and you get more of them, they're with you forever and they sort of unlock new abilities. A lot of people were thinking they could get killed, but that's not the case. The more you have, the more things you can do."

It's a legitimate concern, since they do play a role in combat. Our peaceful stroll in the woods is interrupted by an appearance from a malevolent spirit known as Toshi. His presence scares the Rot, who scatter and burrow into the ground. Who can blame them? With his horned mask, gnarled staff, and the ominous chanting that marks his arrival, it's obvious that Toshi is not here to make a new friend. He levels an energy blast at Kena, who's barely able to shield herself with a last-second pulse.

Toshi disappears after summoning a large wood sprout to fight Kena on his behalf. It's another tangled construct of roots and branches, with a sword-like protuberance replacing one of its hands. The Rot are still freaked out, so they're not much help in the initial moments of combat. Fortunately, Kena's able to hold her own, bombarding the wood sprout with attacks and rolling out of the way of its wild swings. As Kena deals damage, a circular icon ticks into existence in the corner, indicating that help is on the way.

"We have a system called Rot courage, where these enemies and these corrupted spirits are scaring the Rot, so whenever you go into battle your Rot go into hiding," Josh says. "But the better Kena performs, the more courage they gain, and the Rot will join back into the battlefield."

Once the circle is filled, the Rot are ready for action. Kena directs them at the wood sprout, and they lunge at the figure, pummeling it with their tiny fists and creating a stunning distraction. You can't send the Rot out as much as you want; they first have to build up their courage, and the size of the group is a limiting factor. Eventually, once Kena's crew grows to its maximum size of 100 Rot, they can join in more often. They're meant



Kena can send the Rot out in combat, where they're a handy distraction

to supplement Kena's skills, not to replace her need to battle enemies entirely.

"One of the ways that we've done that was making sure that Kena feels powered up with her spirit energy and with the Rot, so it doesn't feel like she's the Hulk by herself," says designer Liz Fiacco. "There's this magical edge to our combat. Trying to make enemies threatening so it feels like she needs to defend herself, as opposed to her laying waste to all these threats in the forest. I think those two seem to be the angles we've used to keep Kena consistent through combat."

Now that the wood sprout is stunned, Kena's able to get in close and finish the corrupted construct off with a few more heavy attacks. Once the sprout collapses into the ground, Kena can cleanse the area by sending the Rot over to a red, tumor-like bulb called a corrupted heart and blasting it with her pulse. The darkened area gives way to a wave of green, with the corrupted area rejuvenated.

Kena and her crew sit on the grass to relax and enjoy another moment of peace. The siblings from earlier join in the moment, emboldened by the fact that the Rot seem to trust her so Kena must be on the up and up. Kena introduces herself and says she's on a journey to a mountain shrine. Saiya says that she not only knows where that is, but that she can provide an escort to the location – once Kena helps save their brother.

"They're not haunting spirits, but they are stuck here," Mike says. "Their older brother, his name is Taro, and he's the spirit who's corrupted and the one you're going to be battling. But in the lore, the other spirits tangled up in his story are also stuck here."

A Harmonious Collaboration

One of the most striking elements of Kena: Bridge of Spirits is its soundtrack, which features the music of traditional Balinese musicians in new compositions. It's the result of a collaboration between composer Jason Gallaty and the ensemble group Gamelan Çudamani. We talked to Jason, as well as Gamelan Çudamani founding director Dewa Putu Berata and associate director Emiko Saraswati to learn how this musical partnership came to be.

Gallaty says that he was listening to Çudamani's music for inspiration, so he decided to see if they would be interested in working together on Kena's soundtrack. "I felt like with something that the music comes originally from Bali and Indonesia and all these instruments come from Bali and Indonesia, I wanted to approach it respectfully and asked to work with them." He sent them an email, and hoped for the best.

"I'll be totally honest, I told the guys this, but my first reaction was like, 'No,'" Saraswati recalls. "No Gamelan in video games. Dewa and I are traditional artists, right, so this gets into more complex problems, but sometimes there's a sense from traditional artists that things like video games are things that we're working against all the time." She says that Gallaty's email was persuasive, however, so she agreed to talk to him on the phone and hear him out.

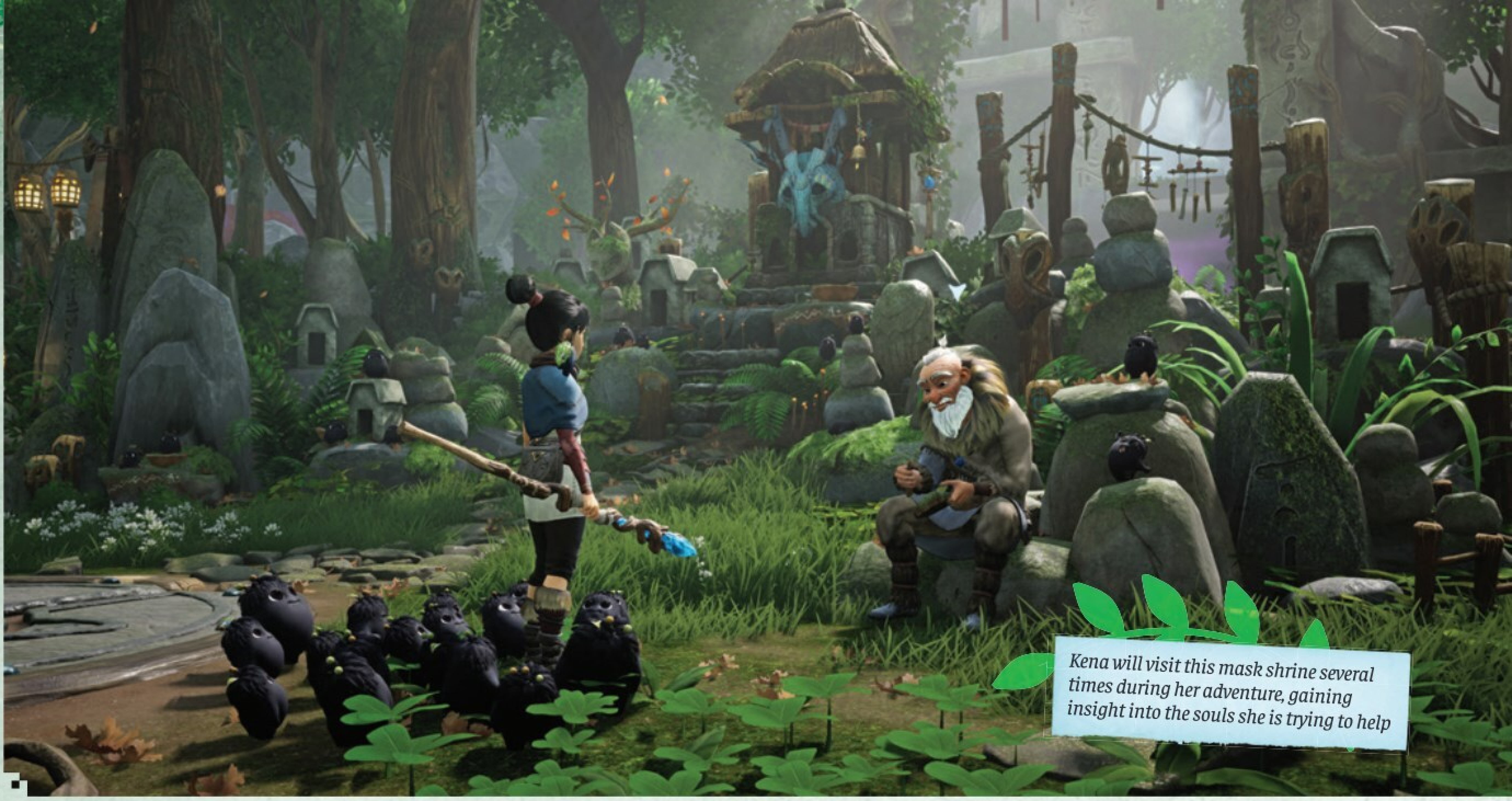
"I was like, 'Oh wait, this kind of sounds cool.' I very, very quickly realized that I had my own prejudice that I was working with, and that I needed to allow this team to explain what they were doing," Saraswati says. "The themes are so beautiful and so resonant with our culture and our values and philosophy. And you know, it's exciting to see that."

After a fruitful recording session in California, Gallaty and Ember Lab's chief creative officer Mike Grier went to Bali for a more in-depth series of sessions. The bamboo instruments are too large to easily transport internationally, and that's where the bulk of the musicians are located, so it made sense to make the trip. "It was my inspiration, but I wanted to make sure that people were aware that this was cultural music at its heart that I was being inspired by, and I wanted that platform to be shared," Gallaty says. "Things developed from there."

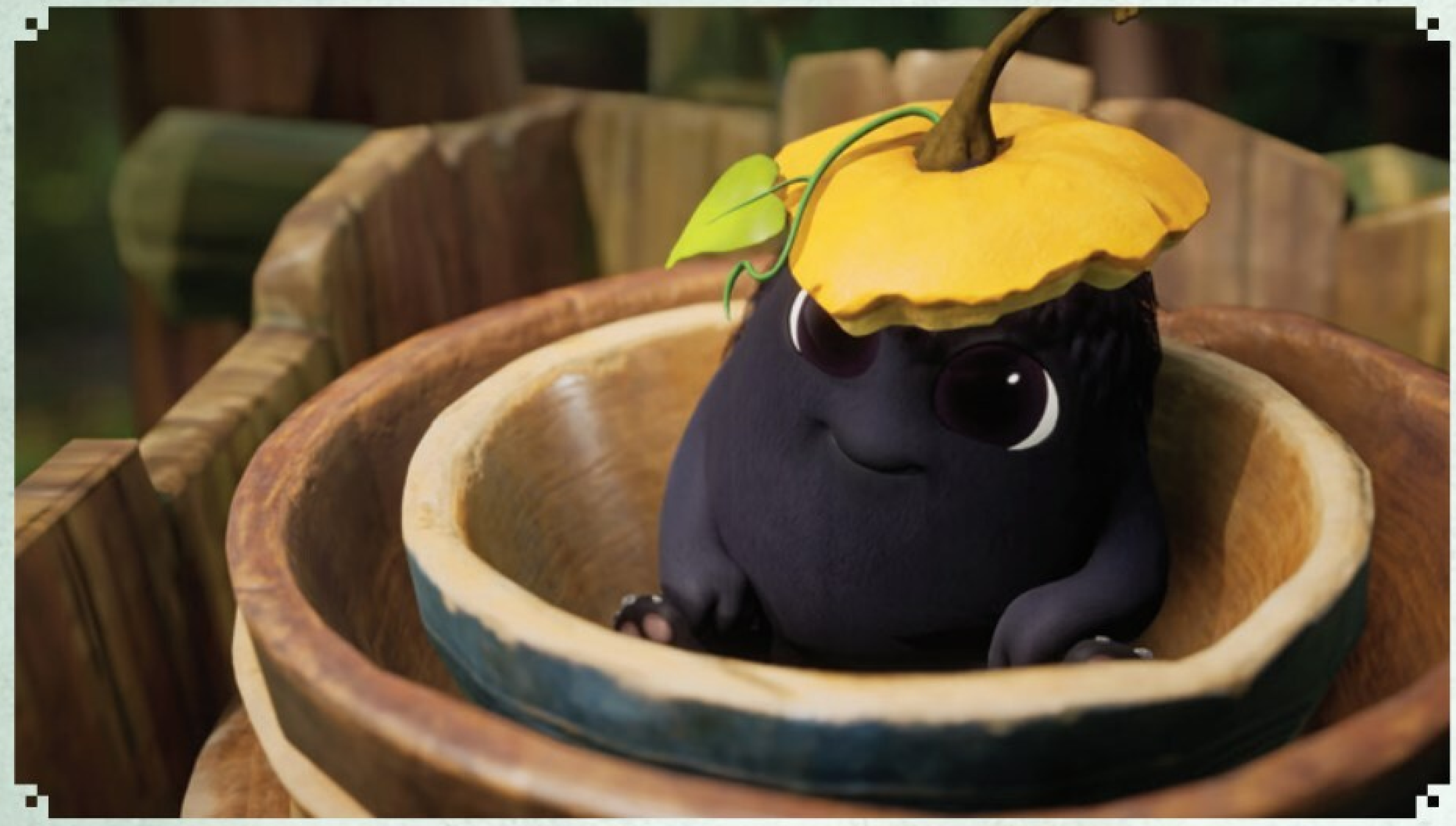
Berata was able to create original compositions based on footage of the game in action or from descriptions of the moments or feelings that Gallaty wanted conveyed musically. After his musicians created new songs, Gallaty would then take those and use them for his own compositions. Working closely with the traditional musicians allowed the team at Ember Lab to avoid pitfalls that other game developers have fallen into, such as when The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time inadvertently incorporated Islamic prayers into one of its songs.

"Jason had samples of beautiful music that was sacred music, and we were like, 'Uh, we can't use that piece,' so then Dewa would make a piece that had the same feeling to it but it wasn't the sacred piece that would be really inappropriate for a video game," Saraswati says. "It was really cool to see that kind of thing happen, where it's actually something that's very new that was composed last year, but it has that same sense of spiritual power and mystery."

Gallaty says the experience of collaborating with Berata and the rest of the musicians was incredibly rewarding. Even though she wasn't initially hot on the idea, Saraswati ended up being just as passionate and happy with the results. "So many things in the media or culture that we see today have so little to do with what our own family values are or what our cultural values are or what our parents have taught us," she says. "It was exciting to see a project, and to be honest, we didn't realize that it was going to be this big. Now my kids are super excited, and everyone in Çudamani is really excited."



Kena will visit this mask shrine several times during her adventure, gaining insight into the souls she is trying to help



THE JOURNEY HERE

Back at Ember Lab, years before Kena made her debut during the big PlayStation 5 event, she was also a little stuck. The team knew they wanted to make a game of their own, but they were still in the process of figuring out what, exactly, that might look like.

They had some ideas and some cash reserves, so Mike says they took some time to develop a working prototype. "That took a couple years to build," he says. "As we had time, as we had resources to do it, we dedicated it to that." Mike had some experience with scripting and programming, and he and the core team were able to create an initial prototype. Later, the studio would staff up and bring on team members who had more game-development experience.

"Originally, the idea of the Rot, before they were little characters, they were going to be the main antagonist of the game," Mike says. "We had this really basic prototype where you were running around in the forest and you had this swirl of Rot chasing you, and all you had was the pulse. They would come up to you and you'd pulse, which would give you a little bit of breathing room before they would swarm you again." It was fun, Mike says, but there wasn't a whole lot going on beyond the platforming. One of the early breakthroughs came through thinking about the concept of what the Rot were, and how it could be used to subvert expectations.

"And that's when we decided to say, 'What if we made them into little characters and they were not enemies, but they were following you?'" Mike recalls. The team fell in love with the idea of having a posse of little guys who were responsible for breaking down matter as part of a larger cycle of renewal and rebirth. "In the original version, that's what they did, but they were also going to decompose you. We sort of twisted that darker idea – what you would associate with 'rot' – and flipped it on its head. And not only did we flip it, but we made them really cute. I think once we did that, a lot of the ideas just started flowing."

"I think its cute little face helped a lot, though," adds designer Jessica Kernan.

"Yeah, there was a period of time where it didn't have any sort of – it was just a blob, basically," Mike says. "Like a pile of rot just rolling around."

Even once the Rots' role was fairly established, the team at Ember Lab was still experimenting with the overall shape of the game. "I know we talked about even stuff like is this a completely nonviolent game at one point," Kernan recalls. "Does Kena just have a flute?" And though the core concepts were in flux, character artist and longtime Ember Lab collaborator Kun Vic shaped the overall design for all of its character concepts.

"She was also younger in the early prototypes, where she was basically seven or eight years old, a little kid," Mike says. "As we developed more of a story and the themes and we knew we wanted her to be a spirit guide to help these spirits move on, she needed a little more experience to do that. She's still a younger spirit guide, but it didn't feel right to have her being a child trying to empathize with these darker, more adult themes. I think that was the biggest reason, and also it changed and influenced where we went with the combat and things like that … Originally, she didn't have many abilities of her own. She was kind of basically like A Boy and His Blob. You couldn't stand on your own; you needed the blob to do everything for you."

In the game's lore, there was once a powerful deity that maintained the balance of the land, but a supernatural event occurred that weakened its power and corrupted the land. Part of Kena's journey involves uniting the Rot and undoing some of the unintended things that have happened in their absence – most notably, the amount of corruption that has been allowed to build up without a presence that lives to decompose matter.

You can get a glimpse of the land before the tragic event throughout the game, in moments where you activate what's called the Rot cloud. Here, the Rot join together again, albeit temporarily, in a swarm that players can move in a sweeping motion using the right analog stick. "It will clear corruption that you drive it through automatically, but then if you use your attack buttons it will do a spin or slam," Mike says. "As it grows, those things become more powerful and the meter gets longer so you can use it for longer periods of time." Its initial form is similar to an amoeba-like blob, but Mike entered some cheats so I could see a more advanced state. I won't spoil it, because it's pretty cool, but I will say that you should definitely make a point of collecting Rot.

THE PITCH

Once the team had a prototype they were confident in, they started reaching out to potential publishing partners for support with help from industry veteran Tina Kowalewski. The team's experience in the advertising world made what might have otherwise been a daunting process a lot easier. "I think our experience pitching to big companies like Coke and MLB, it teaches you how to present yourself in a way that's compelling," Josh says. "And it helped us answer some of those questions that we would get in these pitch meetings. 'How are you going to pull this off?' I think it allowed us to present ourselves in a way that was really strong."

They had another secret weapon in the form of a side project. "We did a Majora's Mask fan film, and it got really popular online," Josh says. "It was pretty well-executed from a marketing and a tap-into-the-fanbase perspective. It was a big risk on our part from a time-expenditure standpoint; it was a big investment." Initially, it was created as a way to generate interest for Kena when they were floating the idea of turning to crowdfunding again, following the earlier success with their short film. Even though they decided to go down a more traditional path, the fan film – *Majora's Mask: Terrible Fate* – became a great calling card for what they could do.

"We had our pitch deck and trailer for this game, and when we'd go into the meeting, people would be like, 'Oh, you're the guys who made that Majora's Mask thing!'" Mike says. "That was kind of fun. It was a great ice breaker, I guess. 'Oh yeah! I remember those guys who made that thing. That's cool. Let's see what your game looks like.'"

"We had the one-two punch of everyone knew that we could put together nice video content, and we did that with the trailer, and then we stopped the presentation and pulled out a laptop and we started playing the game," Josh says. "And it looked like the video." Their hard work paid off, and Josh says that about eight months after their first round of pitches, they signed a console-exclusive deal with Sony.

With a deal in place, the team staffed up to about 15 core members, with some additional outsourcing help. One of the things I couldn't help but notice over hours of conversations with Mike and Josh is the importance they put on relationships and collaboration. For instance, they needed help with creating art for the game, because of the team's small size. About two years into development they connected with a company in Vietnam, Sparx. Josh credits the project's viability, in part, to that partnership. "They've really enabled us to make this," he says. "There are tons of assets in the game. We still have one lead environmental artist, and that's it. There's no way one person can do this."

"We actually went to Vietnam when we started the project with the Vietnam team, to collaborate with them and get them on the same page," Mike says. "We got the project running on their machines and showed them what we were doing. We were questioning whether or not it was going to be necessary to do it, but I think if we hadn't done that the process wouldn't have gone as smoothly. There's a lot of technical things, a lot of ins and outs of the things that we're trying to do with the game, and just being able to sit down and talk them through it and be there with them while they were working on their first couple of things was really valuable." Lead environmental artist Julian Vermeulen acted as a conduit between the team at Sparx and Ember Lab.

The timing for their visit couldn't have been better, either. Two weeks after they returned from Vietnam, the coronavirus outbreak became enough of a concern to prevent further international travel. "It's something we didn't predict," Josh says. "You think about all the problems that could go wrong, how about a global pandemic?"

GETTING ON NEXT-GEN

The brothers say that Sony was a great partner right from the start. And Ember Lab wanted to do what it could to get their game on PlayStation 5. "We always tried to work with them in a way where we kept the potential on top of mind, and I think that was critical in terms of how we presented ourselves to them," Josh says. "I think that was something we prioritized, because we knew there was a chance for the stars to align and us to be able to be on PS5. I think we were vocal about it that we wanted a shot."

"We actually didn't know for a while in terms of where we were going to land with the new hardware and everything, and it was a little bit of a limbo state," Mike says. "It was a little bit stressful at times, trying to figure out, 'Is this happening? Are we going to do it?' But we kept pushing and saying we're only doing PS4 for now and just keep making it the best we can and then the opportunity arose."

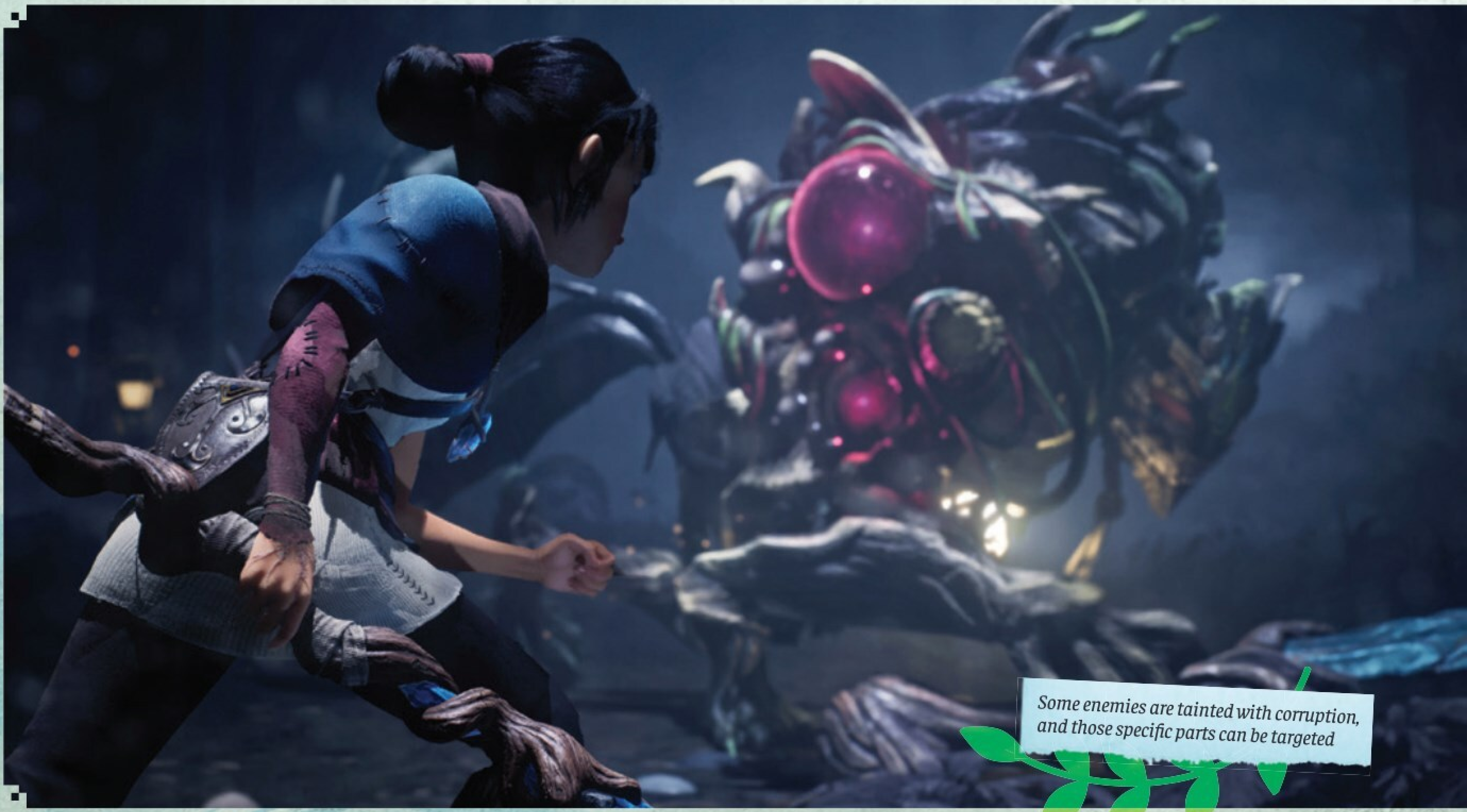
Eventually, they got the green light from Sony. "That was very exciting for the studio, when we got the first kit," Mike says. "I think it was before any of those leaked images came out – it was very early. Honestly, next-gen is so hyped, and I remember growing up just watching the E3s and all of that, and to be a part of that next wave of stuff that was coming was really special for everyone in the studio."

"We had a small ceremony when we opened the box," Josh says. "It was really cool."

"There's also a very exciting thing about being early on a console, because when you're late into a console, you're still trying to shove all the art in and you're like, 'Ah, this console's too small!'" Fiacco says. "But you get a new console, and you're like, 'The world's our oyster!'"

Not only did Ember Lab get to develop their game on the new PlayStation 5 console, but their game would be part of Sony's big console reveal. For the team, that was a particularly surreal moment. "When it came through, and then it was like, 'Oh we're going to be part of the showcase where they show off the first games,' it was so cool to be with all those other amazing developers," says designer Casey Holtz. "It was a great day."

Even though Ember Lab cut its teeth making promotional materials and ads for other companies, creating what was essentially a commercial for Kena: Bridge of Spirits was a challenge. "It was just that internal pressure," Mike says. "You want it to be amazing. I think the night before I watched the trailer on my phone, and I was like, 'Oh, that's garbage, and nobody is going to like it.' Then I watched it again and was like, 'It's pretty good, pretty good.' Just that back and forth."



Some enemies are tainted with corruption, and those specific parts can be targeted

The PlayStation 5 Edge

Kena: Bridge of Spirits debuted during Sony's PlayStation 5 event, so it was only fitting that we got to see it running on the upcoming console. That's not the only way players can experience the game, which is also coming out on PlayStation 4 and PC via the Epic Games Store, but we were excited to see what the next-gen hardware brings to the table. As it turns out, the answer is fairly interesting.

The game wasn't originally designed with the PS5's hardware specs in mind, but the additional horsepower has allowed the team at Ember Lab to do more within the boundaries it initially established.

"It's been really nice," says chief creative officer Mike Grier. "We've been on development on PS4 for most of the project, and squeezing it and getting the performance that we wanted out of it was a nightmare. But having done all that, when we went to PS5 it was nice, because we had a good baseline and then we could just add to it and take advantage of the extra juice."

Some of the changes seem fairly substantial. We didn't see a side-by-side comparison on the game running on PS5 and PS4, but Mike says the forest is more lush and dense in the PS5 version. He says that combat is one of the game's foundational elements, and ensuring that it performed well on the older hardware took priority over the amount of foliage players would see in the environments.

Another thing that will probably be apparent is the number of Rot that players will see in the world. There are 100 of the tiny creatures to discover in the world, and PlayStation 5 players can potentially see all of them scampering around onscreen simultaneously. On PlayStation 4, you can still find all of the Rot, but they won't all be represented visually. Mike says that even with the game's aggressive level-of-detail scaling on the creatures, the performance suffered too much on PS4 with the whole crew onscreen, so they had to make concessions. Their functionality is the same on both versions, but the visual differences are there.

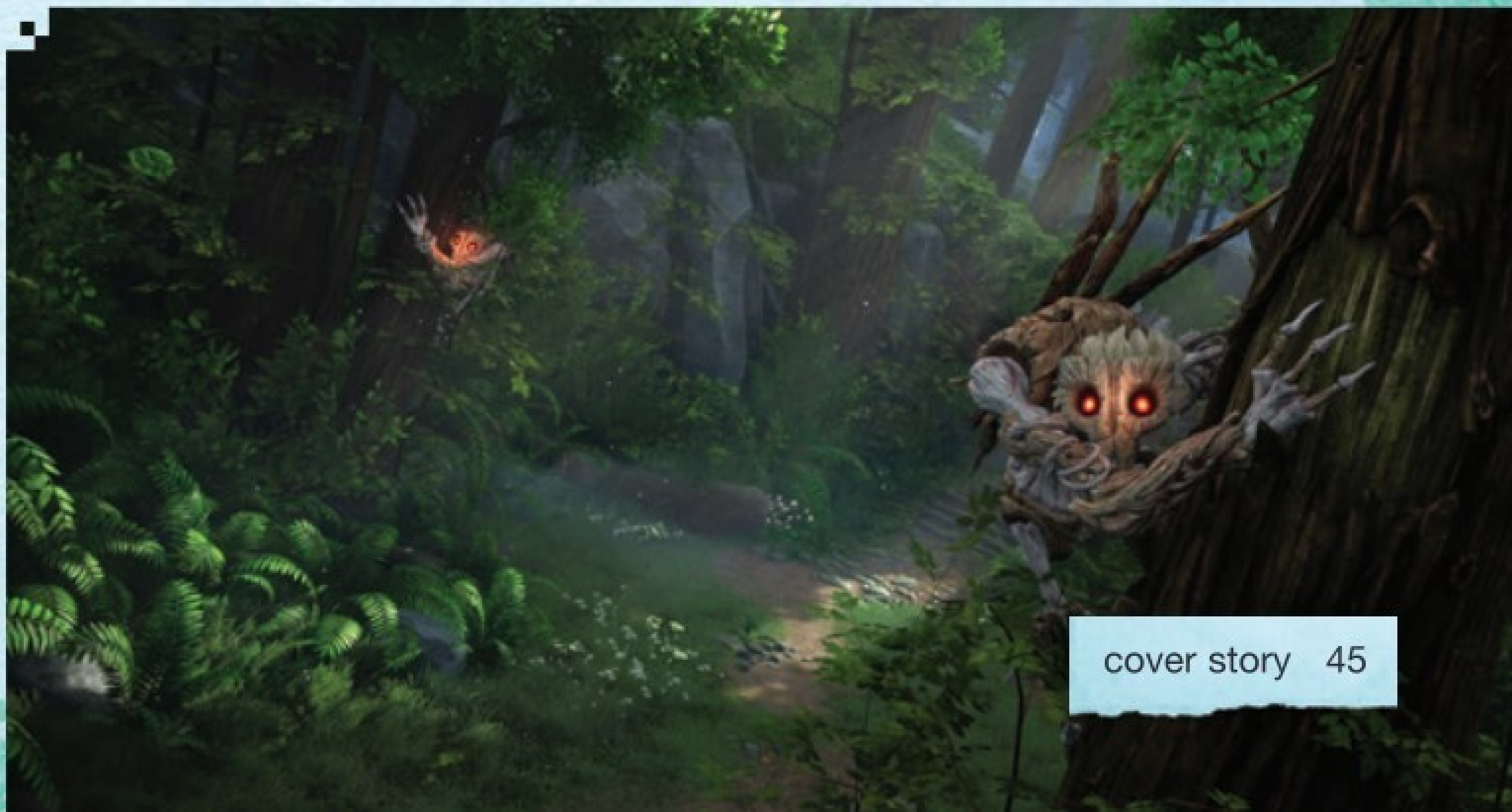
The PlayStation 5's controller is another significant upgrade. "The triggers on the DualSense controller have resistance on them, so we're utilizing that for the heavy attacks, but also for the bow," Mike says. "You draw it, and the way it sounds and the resistance feels like a bow tightening up."

"The triggers are a part of it, but when you get the haptics in the hands, it really brings it all together," says chief operating officer Josh Grier. "Obviously, you feel the tension in your trigger finger, but when you've got the bow drawn and you add the Rot into it, we can dynamically say, 'OK, this right palm feels the Rot jumping into it.' And then when we use the Rot cloud, as the cloud shifts from left to right on the screen, you can feel it transitioning from left to right in your hand, as well."

Designer Liz Fiacco says she was particularly excited about that haptic feedback, which provides a greater degree of feedback to players than the traditional rumble. She says that when she worked at Naughty Dog, the team there used a tool to create rumble on the fly using DualShock inputs. On PlayStation 5, haptic feedback is controlled using an audio wave, which gives creators much more freedom on how it's implemented. "We're a small team, and there's only so much experimentation we can do with it, but we've gotten some cool stuff in already," she says.

Since the team is building the game for PlayStation 4 and PlayStation 5, there's a fair bit of switching around between older and newer hardware. Unsurprisingly, there's a pretty clear winner, at least according to Josh. "Once you go here, it's kind of hard to go back," he says, pointing to the PS5 controller in his hand. "I like the DualShock controller, don't get me wrong, but I want to play with this guy."

If you're still on the fence about making the next-gen transition, or aren't able to get one at launch, that doesn't mean you shouldn't check out Kena on PS4. To sweeten the deal, Ember Lab has announced that players who pick up the game on PS4 can get a free PS5 upgrade when they decide to upgrade to the next console generation.



VILLAGE OF SPIRITS

At this point, we don't know exactly why Kena needs to visit this mountain shrine. One thing is certain, however, as she follows Saiya and Beni into a long-abandoned village: There's work to be done. This village was the site of a tragedy hundreds of years ago, which led to the killing of an ancient god. Nobody lives here anymore, but Kena isn't alone.

The village is essentially the game's central hub, and your further adventures split off from this location. When Kena first arrives, the village has also fallen to the corruption that has plagued the land. Over the course of the rest of the game, Kena can restore much of the area to something that resembles its natural state – but she won't ever be able to erase what has happened.

For example, many of the homes here have become what are called dead zones. As Kena explores the world, she can find trinkets or items that were important to the former residents. When she returns to the village, she can put the item into the house's mailbox and complete a special task. Some are combat-related, others have her (and the Rot) solve puzzles before the corruption heart is revealed. Once that's cleansed, that home returns to a more natural state.

"We have these dead zones being restored, but whenever we restore a dead zone, the house that might have been taken over doesn't come back as a perfect house; it's still broken down but it's beautiful," Kernan says. "It's got overgrowth and flowers and things like that, but it's not corrupted and evil. So we're not getting rid of the past, necessarily, but we're able to give that a better future without erasing what happened."

Those themes of harm and restoration are particularly important as they relate to the former villagers and other restless spirits. The siblings' brother Taro is one such spirit, and Kena agrees to help free him from the troubles that keep him and his family rooted in this world. That means we need to stop by the mask shrine and find Taro's mask.

"Whenever someone dies, the maskmaker creates a mask in their likeness and they place it in the mask shrine, and as it returns to dust then it symbolizes the spirit's transition on to the next life," Josh says. "In this case, because the spirits are stuck, the masks are not decaying and they're staying there. You use the spirit's mask to connect with them, take down some of the walls and barriers that they've set up that are blocking your path, and then eventually help them move on." As a spirit guide, Kena's larger role is to help those struggling spirits find peace.

On the way to the mask shrine, Kena stops by a little cart. These are where Kena can unlock hats for the Rot, buying them with gems Kena finds in the world. These hats are purely cosmetic, but I imagine they'll be one of the more compelling loops in the world. You can outfit each individual Rot with its own hat, such as a mushroom cap. Additional hats can be unlocked in challenges or discovered out in the world; find a Rot hidden in a pumpkin, and you might unlock a pumpkin-topper hat. "We give them liberally, because we don't really care too much about people buying hats, but if you wanted to buy a hat for every guy it would be pretty hard to do," Mike says. "You'd have to go out of your way to find all the currency in the game."

Back to the more important task at hand: The keeper of the mask shrine, a spirit named Zajuro, hands Kena a mask carved to resemble a fox. With that on, she's able to break through an area that was previously blocked. Now that the path is cleared, little orbs that represent Taro's spirit float past. If I follow them, I can see optional scenes that show some of Taro's past struggles and why he's been unable to pass through this life.

Taro isn't just going to appear. Before Kena can confront him and help ease his way, she has to find and collect three items of particular importance to him: a lantern, a knife, and a small box of food. These items are scattered in the area, and can be collected in any order. Of course, to retrieve them, Kena needs to pass through climbing challenges, fight some corrupted constructs, and explore the land thoroughly. To make things easier, she meets up with a friendly NPC named Ruso who teaches her how to bend her staff and channel energy to effectively turn it into a bow. With that piece unlocked, combat truly opens up.

Every ability that Kena has can be infused with the Rots' power and amplified. Her heavy melee attack can be modified with Rot power to pummel enemies with a hammer-like blow. If she sends

the Rot into her arrows, the projectiles are supercharged and penetrate multiple enemies. These abilities require Kena to build up Rot courage, but the more of the creatures she collects, the more she can incorporate these powerful modifiers into battle.

We see how effective the bow is when we get to Taro's knife. It's guarded by the Wood Knight, a miniboss who is the largest enemy we've seen so far. We're cornered in a small clearing, but there's enough room to dodge his attacks and take advantage of Kena's speed. Now that she has a bow, she can fire at enemy weak spots. In the Wood Knight's case, Kena sends the Rot out to distract and leaps into the air to trigger a slow-motion mode. Now it's trivially easy to blast at the glowing spot the knight exposes while distracted by the swarming Rot. Hitting it does a nice chunk of damage, and also rebuilds some of the Rots' courage so she can eventually call them out again.

The Wood Knight is an impressive foe, but it has nothing on Taro. Once we find all three relics, we finally are able to confront the siblings' older brother. He's a restless spirit, and not necessarily evil, but that doesn't make him any less fearsome. Taro emerges, transformed into a twisted construct that resembles a massive, bipedal beast.

"One thing that's cool is that all the relics you've been collecting in the world all tie into the boss fight in some way," Mike says. "You'll see he has this big lantern that the boss wears around his neck that you can shoot with the bow as a way to stun him, and he has a super-enlarged version of his knife that he attacks you with. You can see on his arm he has a pocket of corruption that's optional, but you can use the Rot on that, too, and it's like any other heart and you can pop it and it will do massive amounts of damage to him."

Corrupted Taro lunges at us with his blade, then draws back when we try to counter. Then it rushes with several successive swipes. It's fast and frenzied, and clearly isn't the boy that we initially saw before it transformed. "One of the things I was really interested in during the early days when we were drafting outlines was moving away from some of these basic ideas of good and evil," Kernan says. Taro isn't attached to those relics, specifically, but they represent something that's troubled them in their past. That lantern that swings around Corrupted Taro's neck was what he used to find his siblings when they were separated, for instance. And the fact that they're all spirits now suggests that it wasn't a separation that ended well.

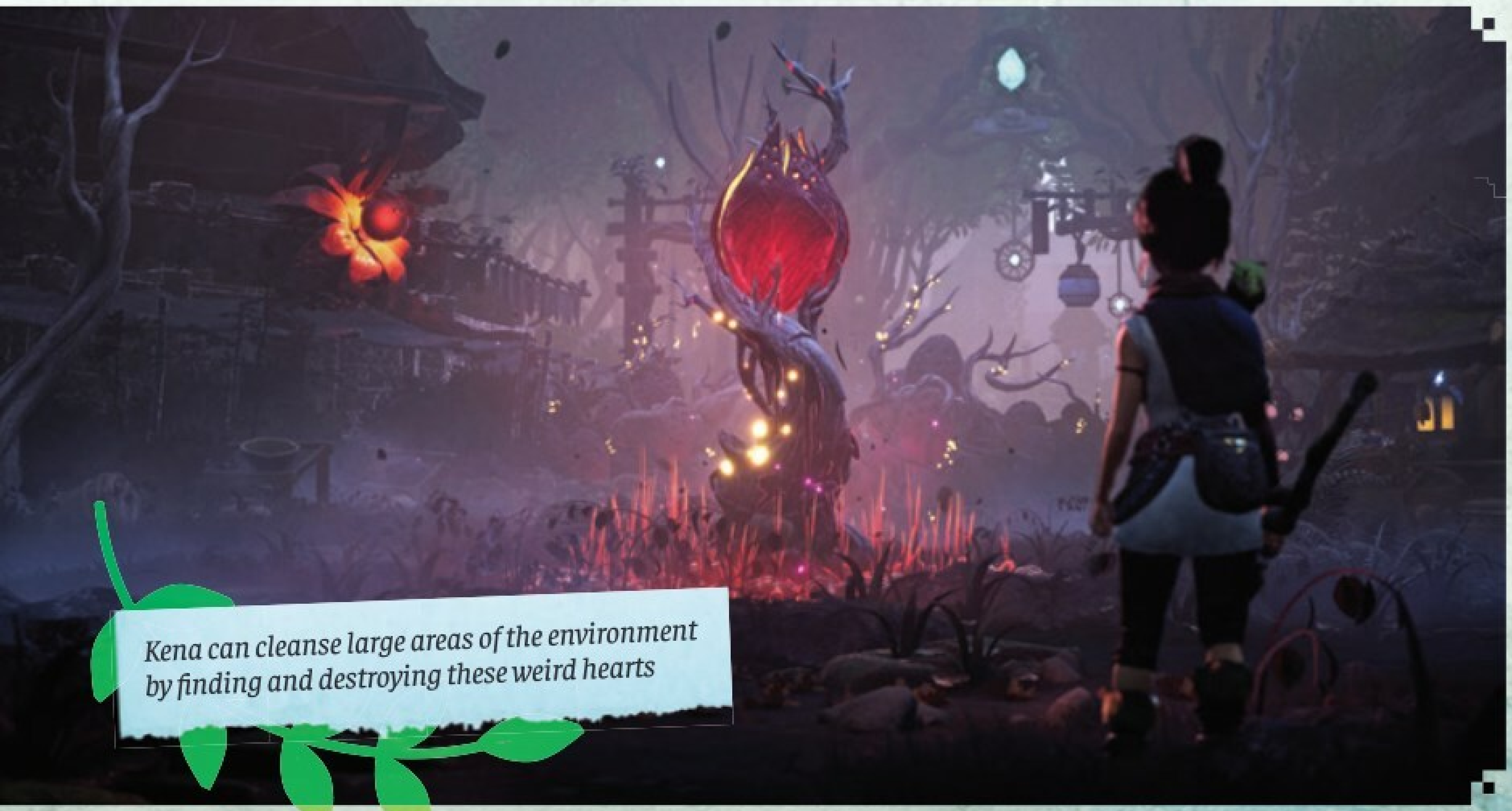
"Taro bears a lot of responsibility, to a point where he does extreme things throughout his story." Kernan says. "He feels like he's got to go out on his own because he's solely responsible for his brother and sister. That's something that drives his actions, and the poor guy is like, 14? Poor kid. And he's taken a lot on his shoulders and in the middle it's consumed him, and Kena's here to bring a better end to that. We are a game, and we love fighting, so she's going to do a little bit of that by fighting the spirit, but we wanted to make sure that we're not beating up this teenage boy or this corrupted, large, monster thing that's not him. He's surrounded by it, but it's not him."

Kena is able to eventually wear this corrupted Taro down after several tense minutes of fighting, and we see the beginning of what looks like an emotionally charged moment – before Mike shuts down the demo. He says these cutscenes are still works in progress, but even though the lip-syncing isn't incorporated and the effects aren't final, what little we saw in the moment had amazing potential.

After seeing the game in action for several hours, it's easy to forget that this is Ember Lab's first major game. It may have been easier for the team to continue plugging away on commercials and more familiar projects, but after speaking to them over the course of several days, I've learned that sticking to the safer path isn't necessarily an appealing option.

Kena: Bridge of Spirits may be their first release, but I would be surprised if it was their last. Even as the team is hard at work wrapping up this project, they occasionally make references to as-yet-unmade next steps. It's only fitting that a pair of brothers who grew up surrounded by theme parks would eventually build magical kingdoms of their own. ◆

Visit www.gameinformer.com/kena for more on Kena: Bridge of Spirits, including exclusive features, interviews, and more

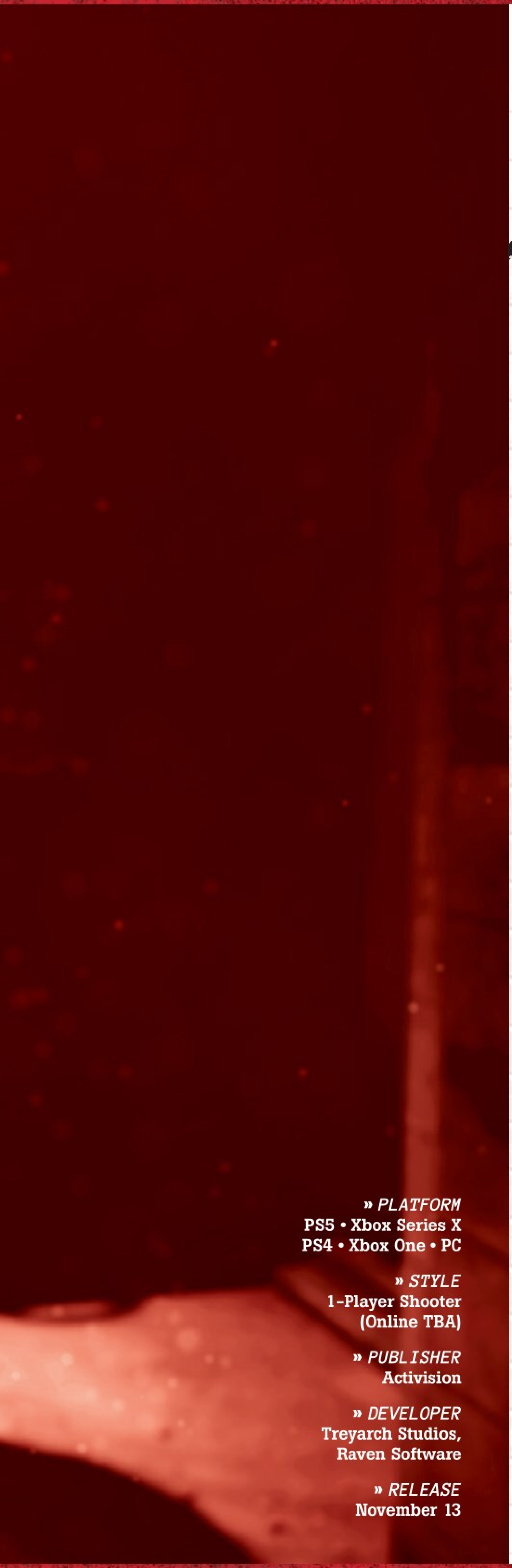


Kena can cleanse large areas of the environment by finding and destroying these weird hearts

HIDDEN HISTORY

In Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War, experience a sequel to the original Black Ops in the 1980s that you think you knew – but never really did.

BY DANIEL TACK



» PLATFORM
PS5 • Xbox Series X
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» STYLE
1-Player Shooter
(Online TBA)

» PUBLISHER
Activision

» DEVELOPER
Treyarch Studios,
Raven Software

» RELEASE
November 13

SPY GAMES

Demoralization. Destabilization. Crisis. Normalization. Behind the scenes, history is altered by shadow soldiers and covert operations.

In this annual series' 2020 release, Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War takes us back to a conflict fought in secret, with ever-present looming dangers of social subversion threatening to upend the established ways of society. With a brand-new campaign, multiplayer, Warzone, and Zombies all coming into play, Treyarch has a lot to deliver. Known for its stories full of crazy twists and turns, puzzles, and mind-altering wizardry, Treyarch's titles have a different tone and feel from other Call of Duty fare, which can feel like summer action films.

Through nuclear conflict and mind-bending twists, the new Black Ops turns conspiracies into realities, and pushes the boundaries of accepted thought – in fun and entertaining ways, of course. This is a Cold War slice of spy fiction that you can experience with a full campaign. Beginning in 1981, you're in hot pursuit of another real-life figure that was never identified or caught, the secret agent known as Perseus. In reality, both the identity and legitimacy of the Perseus figure is in question – but who knows how it will play out here? Paranoia is everywhere as the '80s push the United States and The Soviet Union into a powder-keg faceoff that's always one match away from a massive explosion that could topple the known world.

COVERT OPERATIVES

Activision is going big with the characters and story, which isn't unusual for this franchise. The story is in good hands, with David Goyer of *The Dark Knight* and *Dark City* fame coming in to lend a hand. Goyer also worked on the first two Black Ops titles, so he's had plenty of experience with the tone of this franchise and the wild brain-busting train rides the games can take in comparison to more in-your-face-explosions-all-day Call of Duty entries. Since this is a sequel to the original Black Ops, some familiar faces are back.

Players will recognize Jason Hudson, Alex Mason, and Frank Woods as part of the crack team assembled to get the job done. Obviously, we have no idea how their roles in this title sync up with the continuity of the rest of the franchise, but it's Black Ops, so we are going in with an open mind. Of course, there are new faces too. One of these new characters is a bold badass with a mysterious past named Russell Adler. This gruff, no-nonsense, get-the-job done archetype is something we see a lot, but I'm sure we'll discover plenty of secrets about his past as we execute missions all over the world for the greater good. Prepare to explore Turkey, East Berlin, Moscow, and other locales in a variety of scenarios.

While you're probably used to drawing a gun and plowing through baddies in a Call of Duty title, some missions in Cold War require a gentler touch and different uniforms. Operative garb is something we see in every Call of Duty game, but as hardcore spies trying to blend in with civilian crowds, you see Adler and company in a wide variety of situation-appropriate wardrobe over the course of the game. You still have all the heavy military gear you know and love, but also some '70s and '80s style leather à la *Donnie Brasco*, denim, windbreakers, and ski jackets.

In an especially unusual twist, President Reagan is also in the game. It makes sense considering the time period and scenario, but it was a little curious to see The Gipper recreated for the game authorizing clandestine operations for our lovely band of covert cohorts. While I didn't see him on screen, I think it's a safe bet we'll see Mikhail Gorbachev in here somewhere as well.

Interestingly enough, the plot also takes us to 1968 and Vietnam to unlock some of the deeper, darker enigmas of Adler's past in the form of what appear to be dream sequences. From the short segment of footage we saw of Vietnam, the game includes many different secrets to probe and explore with bizarre interludes in the terrifying action, including doors popping into the field from nowhere, walls and floors falling away, and the very stage looping back upon itself and playing out in different ways.

As a true sequel to Call of Duty: Black Ops, expect to see some familiar faces

Meet the mysterious super spy Russell Adler

BIG CHOICES, BIGGER CONSEQUENCES

Ready to get to work? You create your own character for the campaign in what is just the beginning of massive player choice seeping into the Call of Duty franchise. You can pick skin tone, gender, military background, birthplace, and more. You can also fill out a psychological profile for additional flavor. You have opportunities in terms of mission selection and even chances to do side missions, but the options don't stop there. In fact, Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War has multiple campaign endings depending on your choices.

A number of missions even have a multitude of choices within them as to how you complete them, including a double agent mission that has you deep in the heart of the iconic Lubyanka Building in Moscow. While there, you can use all kinds of tools, including brute force, blackmail, poison, and stealth to get in and get out successfully. While this mission immediately conjured up notions of the Call of Duty: WWII Liberation experience, it appeared to contain substantially more variety. These decisions are at the core of what Cold War is trying to accomplish, and that focus on choice extends across numerous facets of gameplay and narrative. In the Adler Vietnam memory sequences, you have the option to use all kinds of different weapons and techniques to maneuver through various areas, and your paths may end up with decidedly different results. The Vietnam missions allow for non-linear gameplay and solutions, which is somewhat unusual for a Call of Duty title.

BOOTS ON SOVIET GROUND

In a hands-off demo, we get treated to a small snippet of gameplay from around the halfway point that shows our team investigating a top-secret Soviet facility. Coming up to the exterior of a massive structure, the player character uses a high-tech camera to zoom in and analyze the area, as well as snap a photograph. The team heads in, with standard practices for covering each other and breaching doors – all fairly standard Call of Duty flavor. Then we're in, with one of the members of our breach team executing a stealth takedown of what we think is a person in a neon-lit, '80s style arcade.

Turns out, it's just a mannequin. Looking out the window, it's clear that Soviet forces have replicated an entire American town in the middle of this giant space. For what purpose, you might ask? We find out immediately, as a Soviet incursion training team is dumped into the picturesque small-town USA model and begins fanning out. They're looking to train for real incursions on American soil, in the mom-and-pop bakeries, gazebos, and the rest of the Norman Rockwell facsimile.

"They want a live fire drill? Let's hook these f---ers up," says someone on the team before the stealthy, secretive assignment turns into a fast-paced firefight as our crew attempts to blast their way out. The blazing battle occurs while Pat Benatar's "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" blares on the arcade speakers, giving the entire battle a surreal sheen on top of the dire espionage. It's pretty great.

Your journey takes you all around the world and even back in memories to Vietnam

MULTIPLAYER MAYHEM

According to Treyarch's David Vonderhaar, this will be a cross-generation, cross-platform multiplayer experience. While we don't know much about what multiplayer has to offer at this time, Warzone will continue from where it is today, infused by Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War. Players will carry over their progression and items from current Warzone to this new chapter of the battle royale. How this will happen with all the various pieces in play from Infinity Ward to Treyarch is unknown at the time of this writing, but it looks like Warzone players can rest easy that there won't be another Call of Duty battle royale coming down to compete with it this year.

In addition, if you love the deep mysteries and undead slaughter action that Treyarch is known for with the Zombies modes, they're returning with this entry as well. Even as we wait for more details, we expect Treyarch to embrace their grisly baby and provide all the shooting, puzzles, and meta-discovery that have defined the mode for years.

ALTERING REALITY

You're not imagining things in the frozen forest. The new Call of Duty will make its annual release, COVID-19 be damned, on November 13. As the latest Modern Warfare went back to embrace its roots, it looks like Black Ops is doing the same, with a punchy mix of truth, lies, conspiracy, and covert operations. Will we find Perseus? And if we do, will he turn out to be one of our own men? Is it you? Is it me? Forget double agents, how many triple agents are we going to see in this game? What do the numbers mean? One thing is for certain – everything we've seen so far points to a weird and wonderful installment for one of our favorite shooter franchises.

Return Of The Collect-A-Thon!

by Andrew Reiner

A deep dive into CRASH BANDICOOT 4: IT'S ABOUT TIME and its many goals, collectibles, and unlockables

» **Platform** PS4 • Xbox One » **Style** 1-Player Action » **Publisher** Activision » **Developer** Toys for Bob » **Release** October 2

The opening cinematic for Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time is of an extreme close up of Neo Cortex. He's laughing maniacally, aggression lines his brow, but his eyes carry a different story – they're crazed nearly to the point of spinning. The camera pulls out to show Cortex is violently beating something with a stick. As we continue to drift away from Cortex, we see his anger is being taken out on a straw dummy made to look like Crash Bandicoot. He's beating it senseless.

As we pull back more, we see Cortex is trapped on a small asteroid floating deep in space. This shot not only shows us he's losing his mind, but he isn't alone on this rock. He's joined by the equally notorious Doctor N. Tropy, who just happens to be conversing with Uka Uka, a floating mask that may out-evil both N. Tropy and Cortex combined.

As the trio argues about their fate on the asteroid and how they need to keep trying to escape from this floating prison, we are shown a quick snapshot of a rock used as a chalkboard has 22 tally marks on it. This number is significant in two ways: For this story, it shows the number of years the villains have been stranded here, and for us in the real world, the number of years that have passed since the release of Crash Bandicoot 3: Warped on PlayStation.

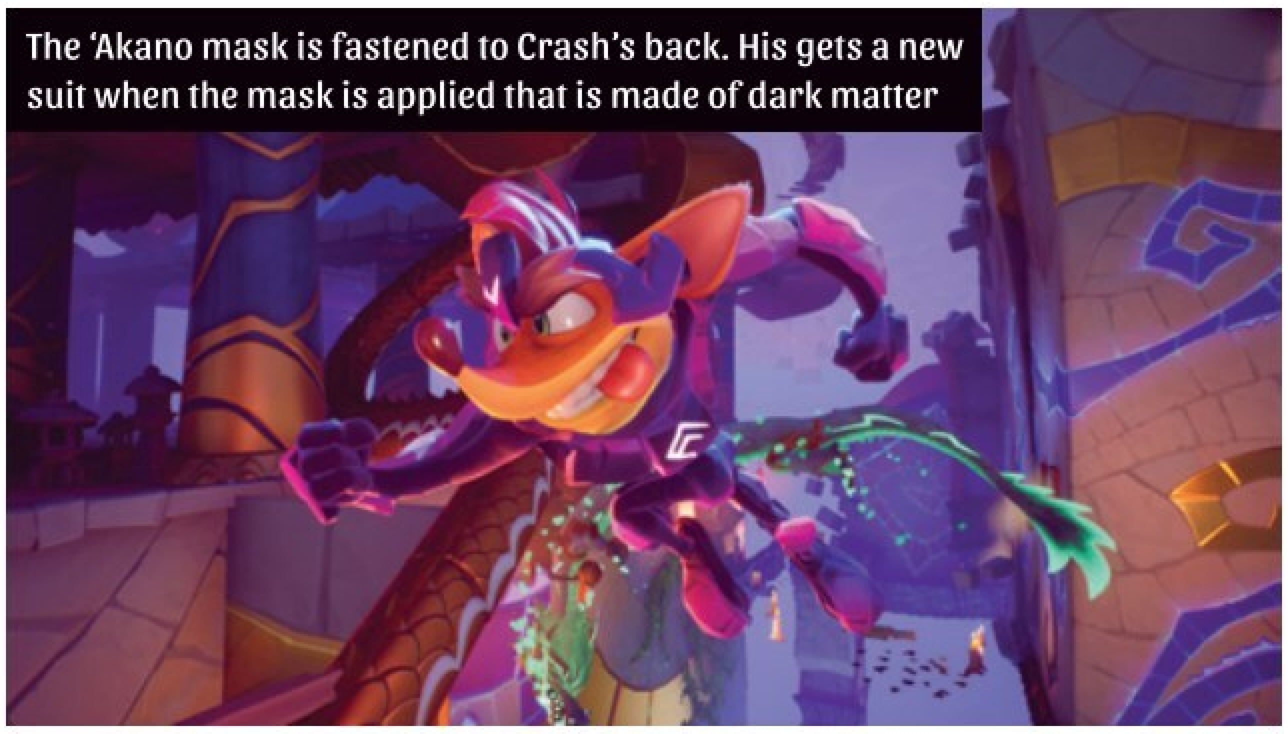
It's About Time's story picks up exactly where that game left off 22 years ago. Developer Toys for Bob is essentially retconning all of the sequels and stories that came after, designing It's About Time to be a true continuation of the original PlayStation trilogy.

The intro movie concludes with Uka Uka growing so angry that he knocks himself out, but his rage opens a tear in time and space that leads to the world he previously tried to conquer. When finding a way to escape, his science wasn't exact; the tear also leads to different dimensions and eras. Cortex and N. Tropy waste no time fleeing the asteroid. Although Uka Uka is their savior in this moment, they leave him behind.

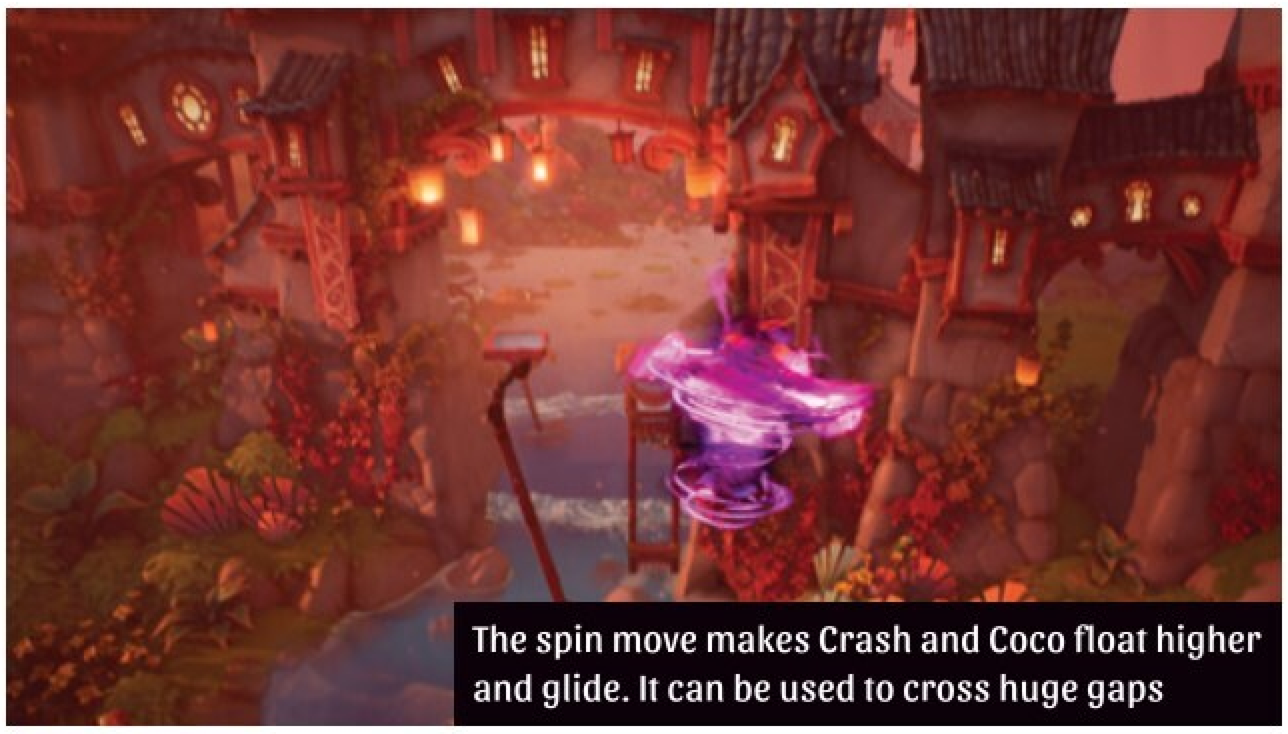
Entities that are tuned to the cosmos are aware there's a tear and that time and space are being upended. Aku Aku, the mask that has sworn to protect the Bandicoot family, is one of those beings hit with a sense of dread, and fears something terrible is about to happen. He hastily awakens Crash, who just happens to be napping on an old patched-up couch sitting on N. Sanity Beach. The orange marsupial is startled but determined to help his old friend.

For fans of this series, N. Sanity Beach was the first level that greeted players in the original Crash Bandicoot game. Within a couple of minutes of starting this new adventure, Toys for Bob cleverly connects the final moment of the PlayStation trilogy with its first shot. The journey players are about to embark on is backed heavily by nostalgia, but the story carries the promise of going to unexpected places and trying new things. Crash won't just be running through jungles. He'll be traveling to prehistoric times and even to a fishing town operated by zombies.

Toys for Bob took me on an extensive tour of It's About Time to show off these new worlds and the nostalgia that drives them, along with the new changes players can expect. It's going to play like the Crash games of old, but with more depth, especially in the collectibles that players can find. From new costumes to more gems to hunt down, there should be plenty of reasons to invest serious time in this sequel.



The 'Akano mask is fastened to Crash's back. His gets a new suit when the mask is applied that is made of dark matter



The spin move makes Crash and Coco float higher and glide. It can be used to cross huge gaps

Endgame For The Masks

Crash and Coco are the stars of this time-bending adventure, but the true "heroes" may be the Quantum Masks. Aku Aku isn't the only one that will be helping the marsupials. Different masks that provide unique powers are spread across the world, and they must unite if the fabric of space and time is to be repaired. The masks, of which there are five, need the marsupials' help. They need physical beings to meld with to unleash their powers.

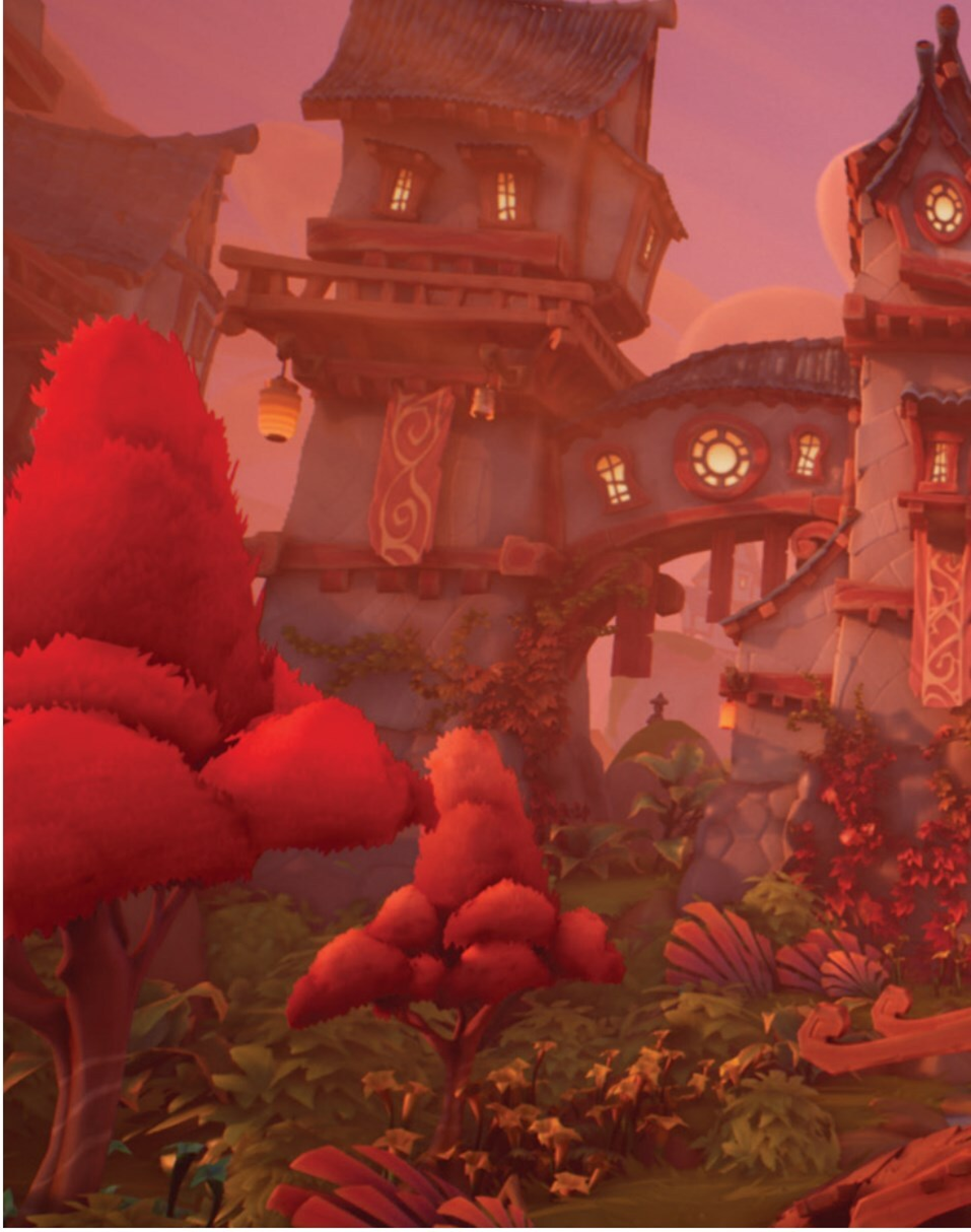
As fans know, Aku Aku provides both protection and a form of invincibility that help the bandicoots survive. He is joined by Lani-Loli, a mask that can make objects phase in and out of reality; Kupuna-Wa, a mask that can partially freeze time; and Ika-Ika, a being that can flip gravity, leading to the bandicoots walking on ceilings.

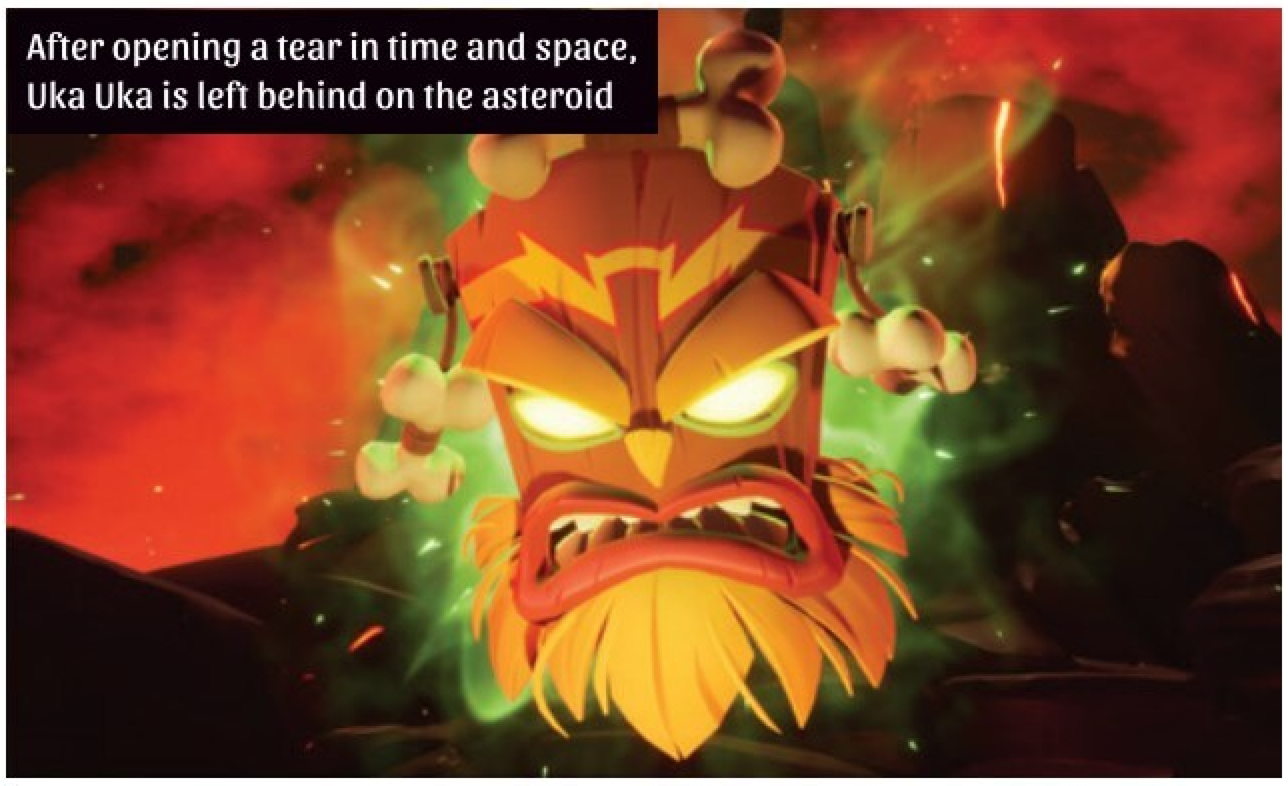
In an exclusive look for *Game Informer*, Activision showed me the final new mask. Named 'Akano (with the apostrophe), the wearer spins violently like a top or tornado. As you would expect, Crash and Coco can use this power to smash through crates and enemies with ease, but its biggest benefit is revealed when a jump is performed. Given the inertia behind the spin, Crash and Coco lift high into the air and then settle into a slow glide. The spin continues indefinitely, but can be stopped by a quick button press, leading to sections where you can run around like normal and then activate 'Akano's ability to spin dangerously across a stretch of the stage.

I saw this power used in a level called Give it a Spin, which serves as the tutorial section for 'Akano. This stage is a part of the Tranquility Falls world that takes the bandicoots to the year 1402. I see Coco warp in and sprint forward to greet 'Akano. He's sitting in the middle of a well-trodden path surrounded by beauty. Trees with red leaves are all around her, and behind them sits a city on the hillside with houses crammed together to make it look like one giant castle. A pink sky with a few white clouds overlooks this backdrop.

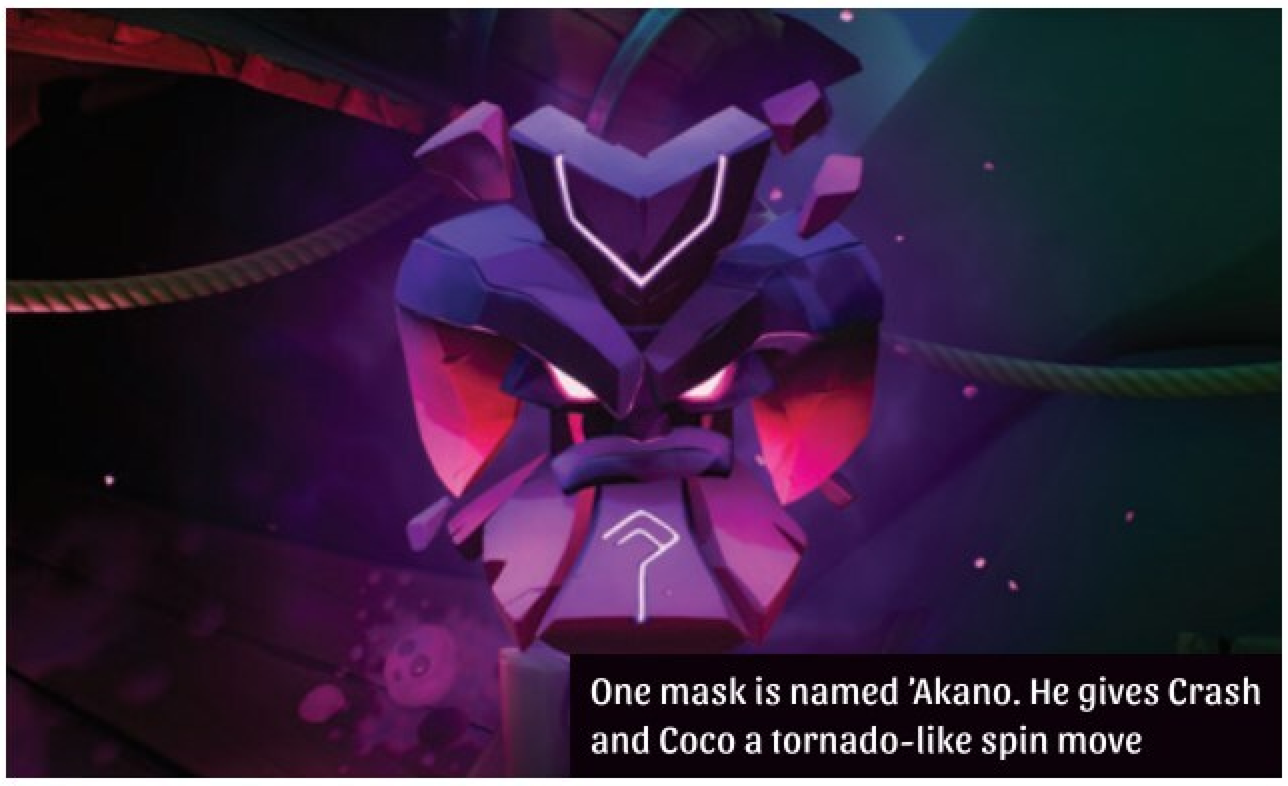
When 'Akano merges with Coco, she dons purple armor with 'Akano fastened to her back. He taps into dark matter to initiate his violent spin, which can even shred metal crates (which usually require a body slam). Coco uses the power to shatter stacks of boxes, and then glides over a massive gap. Given how far she can travel with it, Toys for Bob decided to change the realistic shadow under her to a yellow ring that is easier to spot. Yes, it breaks the immersion and gamifies the action a bit, but it's needed given how fast the gameplay moves.

Enemies that shoot projectiles are also at a disadvantage against 'Akano, who we see knock back gooey green magics to their hosts. The level is filled with all sorts of crazy wildlife, including hungry lily pads that will try to eat the bandicoots if they stand on them for too long. Dangerous Nitro and TNT boxes are everywhere, posing another challenge that requires quick switches from gliding to running to avoid detonating the crates. I also see a new crate type that has fire shooting out of four of its sides. Again, this is something you don't want to interact with unless you hit it from the top, an action 'Akano's glide can help make easier.





After opening a tear in time and space, Uka Uka is left behind on the asteroid



One mask is named 'Akano. He gives Crash and Coco a tornado-like spin move

The backdrops are stunning and tell their own stories

As the level is explored, I notice that crate progress is now updated through a handy meter, in this instance reading 112/216 have been smashed. Wumpa fruit and gems are also tracked in the same way for end-of-the-level completion goals. If you earn enough of any of these things, you unlock gems. Toys for Bob also included a death meter that shows how many lives you have left if you are trying to get the gem for completing a stage with three deaths or less.

In runs through a level, a player could conceivably unlock six different gems, which could hit the required goal that unlocks a new costume for Crash or Coco. Both of these characters can unlock 26 unique costumes ranging from pirate attire to a dinosaur suit. These skins can be equipped at any time once they are unlocked.

Even if you obtain all six gems, the stage still holds more secrets. By entering that stage again through the new N.Verted mode, you can earn another six gems. In N.Verted mode, everything is mirrored, meaning a jump to the right will now be a jump to the left. Toys for Bob also changes up the art style. For Give it a Spin, the vibrant colors are washed away to stylish black and white tones inspired by sumi-e ink paintings. The level has an entirely new life to it, and Toys for Bob tells us the mirrored play will mess with your mind and throw off your muscle memory. The gems that are hidden in the level have also moved to new locations. N.Verted mode basically doubles the number of stages. The wumpa fruit in N.Verted mode is called bumpa fruit and is colored purple instead of orange.

The sumi-e art style is only used in the Tranquility Falls world. Each of the other worlds have their own unique art styles for this mode. Hazardous Wastes' N.Verted look leans heavily on neon lighting to lead players along, only it dims over time and checkpoints have to be hit to brighten them. The N. Sanity Peak world uses something Toys for Bob calls "sonar-like" that pings enemies and pits and gives players just enough of a visual indicator to get by.

I was given a tour of the Dimensional World map that draws heavy inspiration from the first game. You'll see dotted lines leading from the different stages. The core levels are represented as circular spaces. The Timeline stories, which let you play as villains or other characters, are represented as square spaces. In most worlds I only saw one square space, but some have more.

The worlds I saw were Mosquito Mash, with the time of "a few days ago." The Timeline square for this world is occupied by Dingodile, meaning you get to play as him and see how his interactions affect Crash and Coco's progress through one of the world's levels. N.Sanity Island's world is set during the present day. Hazardous Wastes takes players to the future year of 2084, whereas Salty Wharf takes them back in time to 1717.

Time trials return to each level, but with a little twist: Toys for Bob recorded a play-though and created a ghost so players can get immediate feedback in real-time to see if they are going to beat the time or not.

Crash Bandicoot 4: It's About Time looks ridiculously fun, and is shaping up to be a charming love letter to the series Naughty Dog created. The new ideas blend right in with the existing platforming action. We just need to see how it plays and all comes together. Thankfully we don't have long to wait, as the game hits PlayStation 4 and Xbox One on October 2. ◆

Outriders

Hands on with the turret-wielding technomancer

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Shooter
(3-Player Online)

» Publisher
Square Enix

» Developer
People Can Fly

» Release
Holiday

We've been keeping an eye on People Can Fly's latest sci-fi shooter, Outriders, ever since it graced the cover of our magazine a few months ago. At that time, we battled enemies on the planet Enoch as three of the game's announced classes. The studio recently revealed the mysterious fourth and final class, the Technomancer, and also let us check out the turret-wielding character in an extended hands-on session.

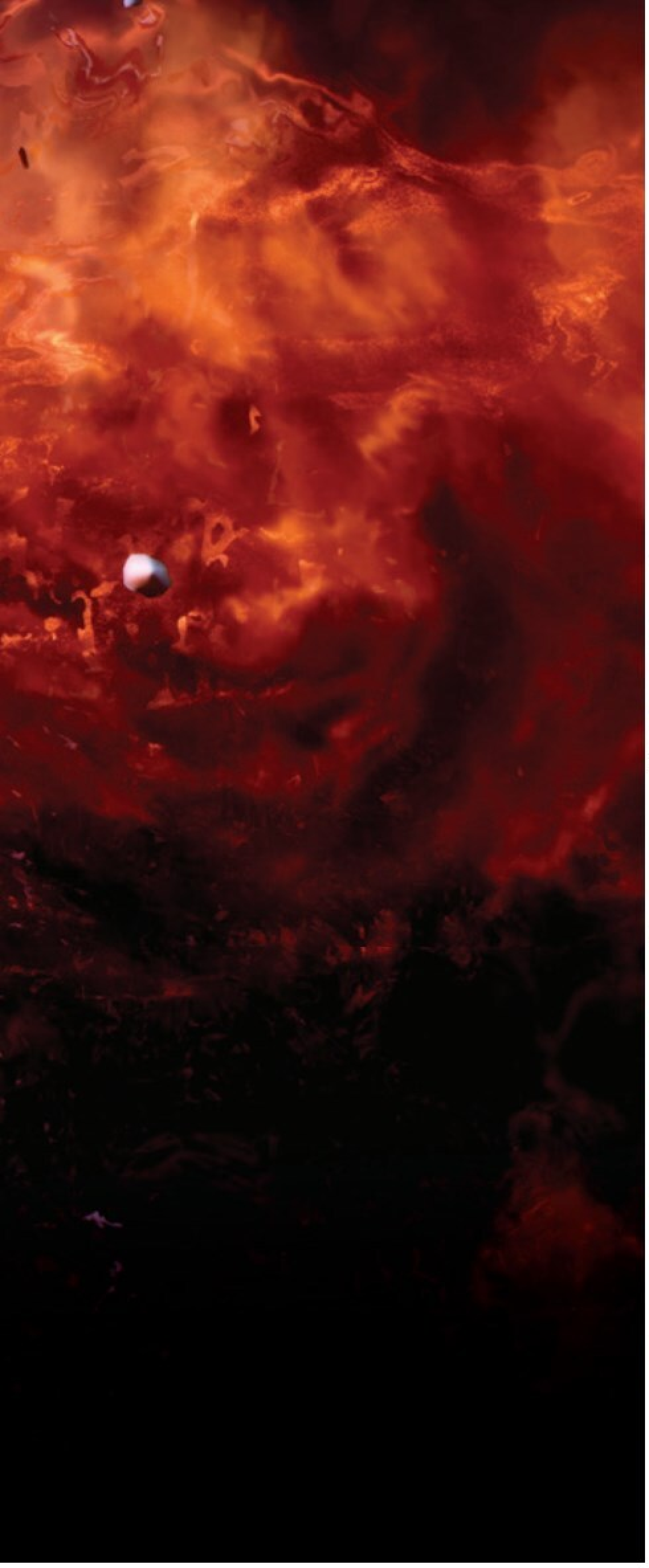
Based on name alone, you'd be forgiven for assuming that the class had some kind of undead-raising skillset. After all, the Pyromancer, Devastator, and Trickster have skillsets that roughly align to classic fantasy archetypes of a fire mage, tanky fighter, and rogue/assassin. The Technomancer may not be able to revive dead enemies and have them fight on your behalf, but it can raise a variety of turrets and ordinance from the scrap that litters the battlefield's surface.

Our demo begins about 15 hours into the game's campaign. I start out by looking at my class tree, which features a large array of abilities to invest my skill points into. Initially, I go deep into sniper-associated skills, but quickly realize that isn't how I want to play. Fortunately, I'm able to reset the tree in the demo at will, and I lean into a path that increases the amount of health I leech from enemies, keeps my turrets alive longer, and reduces the amount of damage that elite enemy types deal to me and my teammates. I soon learn that the last one, in particular, will pay dividends to my squad.

Once we get our bearings, my squad gets to work. Our mission is to escort a truck containing a prisoner to its destination. Of course, the path takes us directly through territory under control from hostile forces. I'm accompanied by a Devastator and Trickster, and I'm confident that we'll be able to get the job done. It turns out to be a little tougher than I'd initially expected. We walk right into an ambush, with dozens of grunt-like enemies picking at us from a distance. I rush into cover behind some wooden planks, but it's quickly reduced to a pile of splinters in an instant. Taking damage, I scan the area and see some concrete blocks that will hopefully provide a more permanent respite.

Every class in Outriders regenerates health in a unique way, such as the Devastator refilling its pool by killing enemies within a close range. Unlike the others, which can yo-yo wildly from low health to full depending on enemy deaths, Technomancers have a more steady way of keeping healthy. "He's restoring health by dealing damage to enemies," says senior designer Piotr Nowakowski. "He has a weapon leech and an anomaly leech, stealing from skills. He can have sustained damage and heal from that. He's the opposite to other classes that are trying to kill enemies; here we have a sustained heal so you need to plan more. If you plan correctly, you're always in a good place with health, but if it starts going badly you don't have instant health regain – unless you grab a skill that heals you."

While each of my squadmates wields an arsenal of shotguns, assault rifles, and other familiar weapons, we come with our own unique skillsets. Over the course of several hours, we learn how our abilities synergize with those



of our teammates', which leads to some great moments. For instance, the Devastator can pull groups of enemies close together, which are then slowed down by the Trickster's time-altering field. That gives me a great opening for summoning my Pain Launcher, which fires a salvo of explosive blasts before it disappears.

Initially, I used an ability called Scrapnel, which was a grenade-like object that damaged enemies and also interrupted their skills. It was great when fighting an altered captain, who could summon fiery tornadoes, but I found myself needing to be revived more than I liked. I ended up swapping Scrapnel for Fixing Wave, which instantly healed a third of my health, as well as any companions within its generous radius. I never felt like I'd switched over to a dedicated support role, but it was nice to have the flexibility to help my squad whenever necessary. As with all of the skills in our loadouts, cooldowns were short enough to encourage us to experiment and err on the side of using them too often rather than hoarding them for special circumstances.

Game director Bartek Kmita says he plays the Technomancer more strategically than he does with other classes. Rather than jumping into the fray, he prefers to let his turrets and mines do the work while he surveys the battlefield. It's a natural role for players who like to take on more of a support role. "You can be effective from a distance and have control over the battlefield and not only deal damage but also pay attention to what your colleagues are doing to heal them or to help them in other ways," Kmita says. "The Technomancer has a more natural style of this vision of the whole battlefield, which automatically gives you a class that is more open to being a support class."

That's not to say you're forced into that position. Nowakowski's take on the class focuses more on crowd control and dealing debilitating status effects while sniping away with a marksman rifle. "If I set that up correctly and have good equipment, enemies cannot touch me in the arena; I'm able to eliminate every one," he says. » **Jeff Cork**

Griftlands

Gradual evolution pays off

» Platform
PC

» Style
1-Player Strategy/
Role-Playing

» Publisher
Klei Entertainment

» Developer
Klei Entertainment

» Release
2021

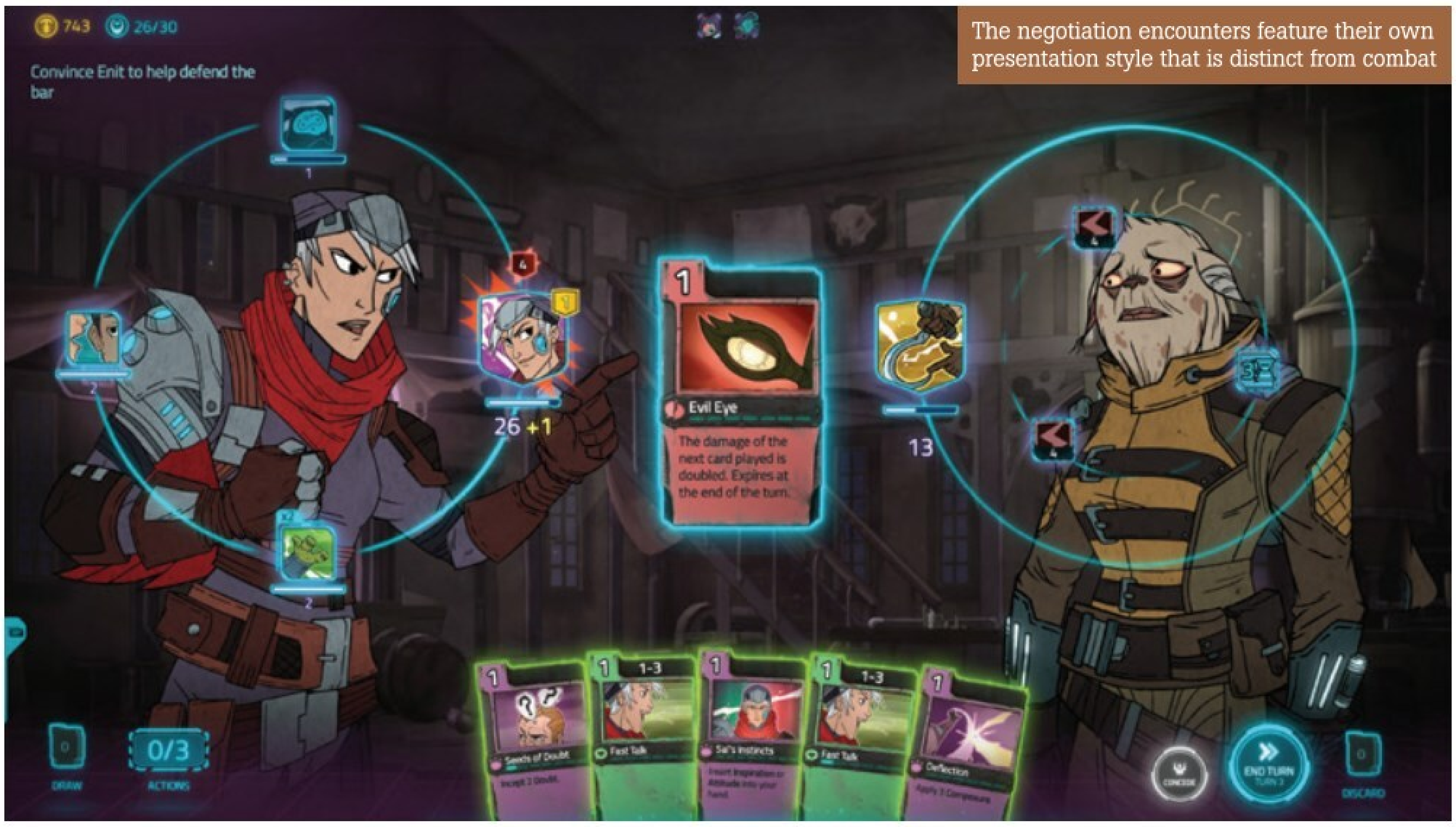
Griftlands has gone through big changes over the course of its development. The team at Klei Entertainment has found success over the years with creative and stylish ideas, catapulting from taut action projects like Mark of the Ninja to entirely different genres, like the survival mechanics of Don't Starve. Griftlands follows suit, representing a whole new type of game for the studio, but one that has evolved dramatically from its original incarnation. "Originally, it was a much more rollicking experience," says designer Kevin Forbes. "It was heavily inspired by Sid Meier's Pirates, or Mount & Blade for a more modern descendant. It was open world, free-roaming, do what you want, with more of a JRPG kind of battle system, and a weird focus on economics."

But years of iteration have transformed the game, borrowing the strategic nuances of deckbuilding roguelike card games, like Slay the Spire or Monster Train, and layering those into a richly drawn fictional framework. "The shuffle mechanic of a card deck limits your available options on a given turn to a subset of the options that are available in the deck," Forbes says. "Which means that you have to improvise every turn – you have to make a decision. All of a sudden it makes the battles have an arc to them, and it's more interesting. You can't just hit guy with big sword at every turn." Within the rich narrative of Griftlands, the deckbuilding systems stand in for many of the RPG leveling systems, as card upgrades, card acquisition, and deck manipulation help a character grow. And after each run, you gain new bonuses that offer an edge in your next playthrough.

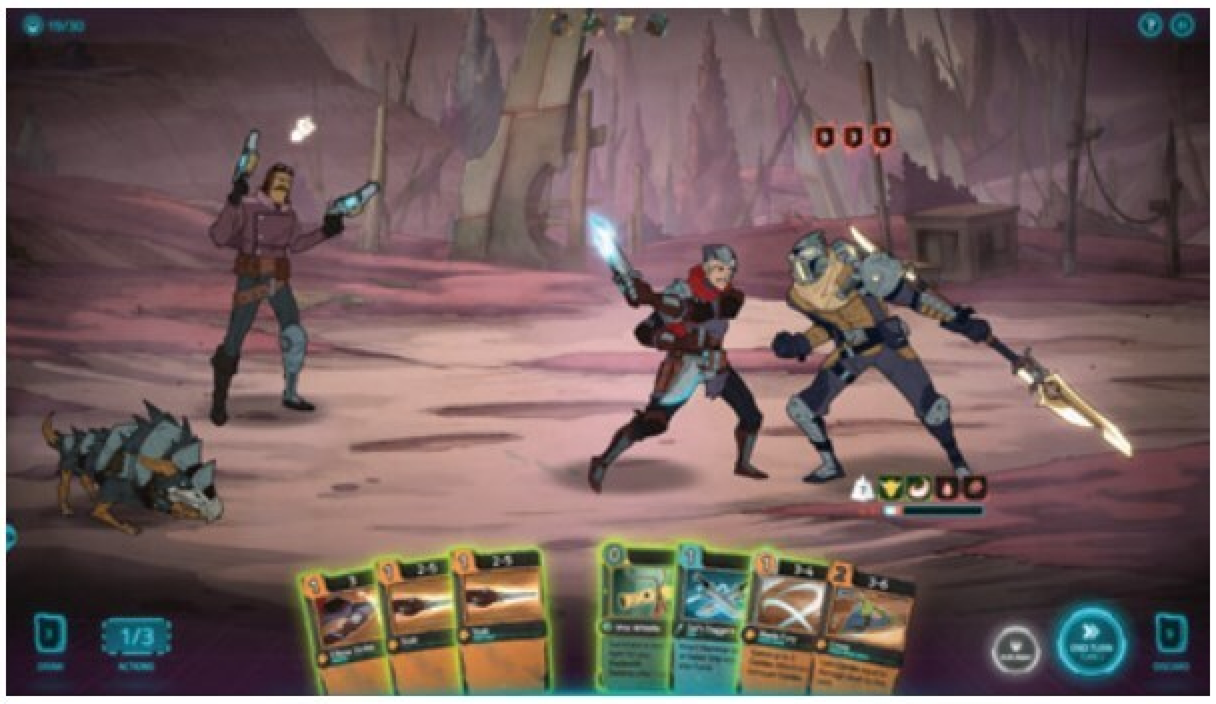
Griftlands distinguishes itself from other deckbuilders in two important ways. "There are two completely separate decks," Forbes explains. "You are balancing the progression of both of those, and not letting one get left behind." Each deck features separate visuals, mechanics, and style. The combat deck includes an array of attacks, blocks, heals, and everything else you'd expect to win a brawl. Meanwhile, the negotiation deck offers different flavors, codifying many conversations into a tense exchange of arguments, boasts, verbal jabs, and exaggerations meant to overwhelm your opponent, and turn them to your way of thinking. "If you're very good at the card game, and quite lucky, I think you can play a pure combat run," Forbes continues. "But it will be quite hard. The way balance is intended to be, is that you do have to fight the bosses in the end, but negotiation makes everything easier."

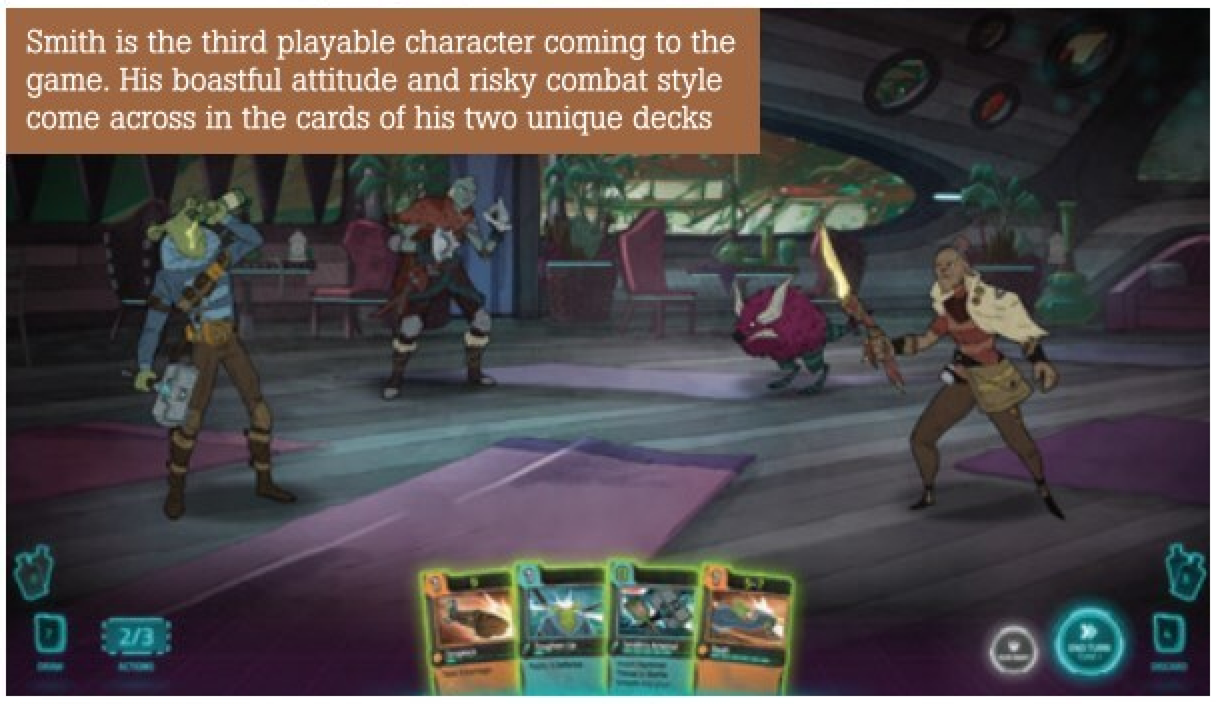
In practice, it makes for a fascinating give and take, as the opportunities for diplomacy, lying, and intimidation afforded by the negotiation deck act as a modifier to your efforts, easing your way through situations, and often avoiding entire battles that might otherwise leave you reeling. In turn, the combat deck inevitably comes into play – and if you've reserved your health and other resources – offers the chance you need to fight through battles where the odds are always against you.

Beyond its unique dual decks, Griftlands' other big selling point is the focus on narrative, world-building, and characters. Rooted in the RPG tradition from which the game was born, Griftlands has a colorful and lived-in sci-fi setting, inspired by '70s Moebius art and the early *Star Wars* films. The stylized characters move through a world filled with bizarre creatures, complex alliances and rivalries, and surprising technologies. You explore that setting through the eyes of three unique protagonists, and it's only after you start digging into the game that the huge differences between the three make themselves apparent. This isn't just different heroes running through the same story. Each character has an entirely separate adventure and location to uncover, each fleshing out the world from a new perspective. "Sal is scrappy, and trying to make her way in the world," Forbes says. "And Rook is kind of grizzled and would betray his own grandmother for a sandwich. Because everyone has two decks, we get to express their personality through those decks. Sal focuses on improvisation, whereas Rook is more



The negotiation encounters feature their own presentation style that is distinct from combat



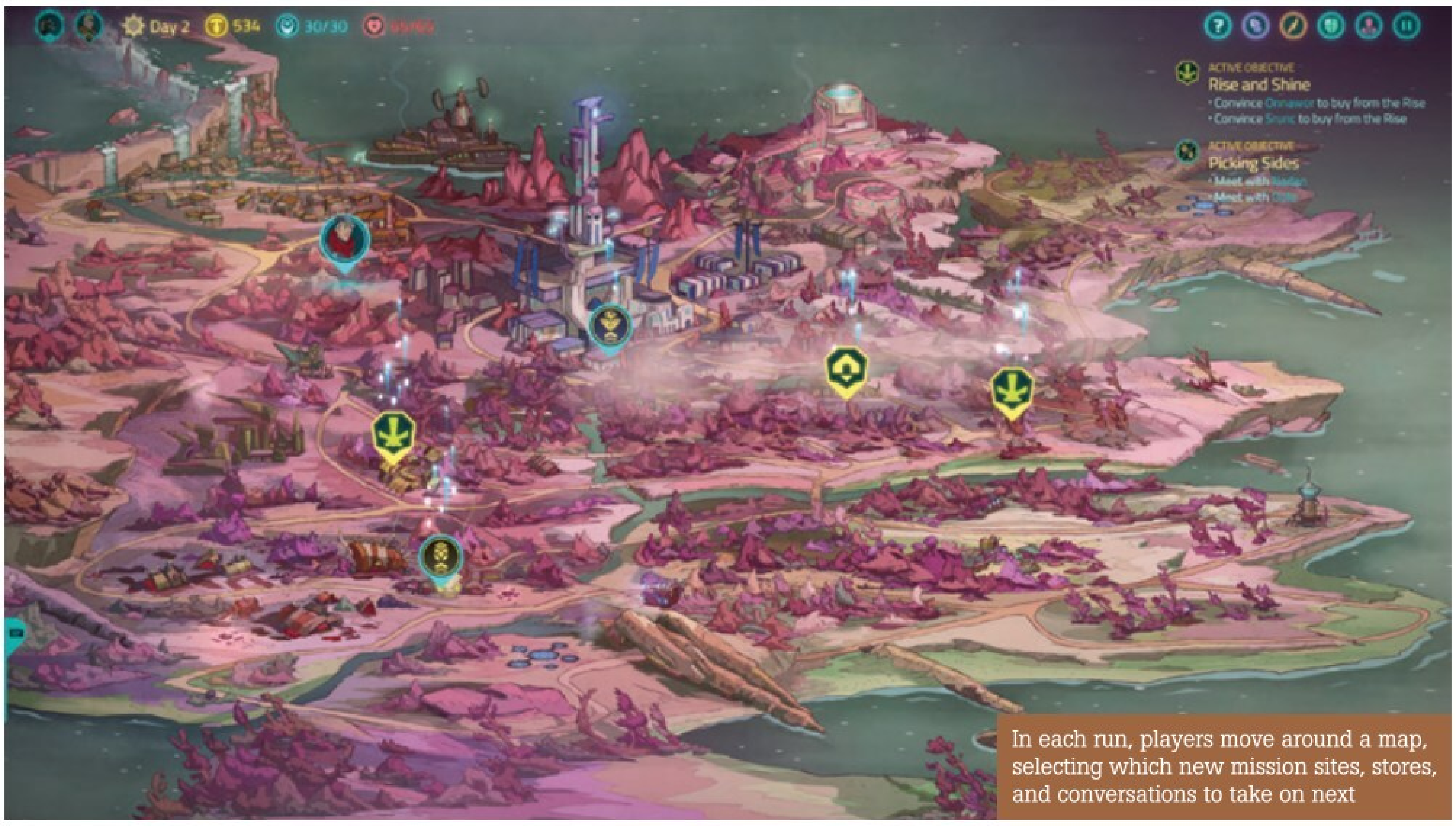


Smith is the third playable character coming to the game. His boastful attitude and risky combat style come across in the cards of his two unique decks

calculating, resigned to his fate, and there's a whole gambling motif."

The third character, Smith, is just now beginning to come to light in the gradual unfolding of early access. Like a cross between a frog and a slug, Smith is a boisterous amphibian who looks for all intents like a Muppet. He's a rich kid who used to get in a lot of trouble, and is only now returning to the big city to reclaim his inheritance, after a giant sea monster flopped onto the beach and killed his parents. His combat deck is all about big swings that only sometimes connect, often draining his health down before other actions heal him back up. In negotiation, he's focused on dropping his own name and using brags to get his way. Like the other two playable characters, the decks reflect his personality and style, and go a long way to communicating the narrative tone.

Klei is aiming to roll out Griftlands to full release sometime in 2021, but this game is already in excellent shape, and well worth time investment. The smart, choice-driven storytelling really distinguishes the flow of a run from other deckbuilders, and the dual-deck system adds a fascinating playstyle wrinkle that encourages experimentation and innovative tactics. The game is growing on a monthly basis, including recent new additions to the meta-progression between runs, offering up perks that can give you the edge in the challenging encounters. The team is also implementing an easier story mode for players who are purely in it for the adventure. Mod support, controller rebinding, and of course the addition of Smith as the third character are also on the horizon, but there's no need to wait to dig in; Griftlands already offers plenty of cards to fill your hand. » **Matt Miller**



In each run, players move around a map, selecting which new mission sites, stores, and conversations to take on next

Gotham Knights

The new guard

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Role-Playing
(2-Player Online)

» Publisher
Warner Bros.

» Developer
Warner Bros.
Games Montreal

» Release
2021

Batman is dead. As the jumpstart to both a narrative and the gameplay that arises within that story framework, it's not a bad place to start. What happens when the caped crusader fails to rise? How does Gotham City react, especially its criminal underbelly? And who can step up to take the Dark Knight's place? Warner Bros. Games Montreal is embracing those questions with its recently announced project, a cooperative action/RPG that pushes a young cast of heroes into the limelight.

"We managed to keep a lid on the fact that we were killing Batman," says creative director Patrick Redding. "That was the thing I was most excited about. I know that sounds a bit morbid. But I love the promise of delivering a new guard of heroes from out of the Batman universe and really putting the spotlight on a playable Batman family, and the reason why." We are used to Batman taking center stage in stories about Gotham City, but this time, four protégés and former partners take top billing. Batgirl, Nightwing, Red Hood, and Robin are all playable main characters, and each has a unique personality and playstyle.

"For us, they aren't supposed to be four mini-Batmans," Redding says. "They are people who have trained and have some of that crimefighting DNA as a starting point, but either through virtue of their story or just their personalities, they've started to evolve in these four distinct ways." Tim Drake, as Robin, is focused on stealth, using tricks to disrupt, confuse, and apply status effects. Nightwing features a more "ping-pongy" style, using his acrobatics to tackle large groups of enemies. Apart from Batgirl's computer hacking expertise, she's a focused attacker who pummels enemies until they're down.

While every one of the characters has ranged options, Red Hood is a dedicated gunslinger, with a more brutal approach to combat. "What's really interesting is Red Hood's evolution," says senior producer Fleur Marty. "I think it's going to really surprise people. It taps into his storyline. He was dead and was resurrected. There's something that is going to come out of there, and that he's bringing to the fight."

Set in opposition to these rising Gotham Knights is the Court of Owls – a fan-favorite group within the Batman mythos. "The Court of Owls is a secret society of Gotham's most decadent and corrupt wealthy, who have been around since the founding of the city, 350 years ago," Redding says. "Over time, as they've sought to entrench their power and hold over Gotham, they've warped it into the twisted east coast city that it is." For the development team, a big thematic draw is the idea of this new guard of heroes taking on the old and entrenched power at the corrupt heart of the city.

As players confront the Court of Owls and the rest of the criminal element across Gotham, several features set the game apart from the Arkham series. In fact, this fiction stands independently from that franchise. Beyond that, it's the breadth of the playspace. This is a fully open and living world that encompasses the full city of Gotham, where the citizens go about their days; the story plays out over a long stretch of time, rather than a single night or two. Gotham Knights is also interested in the RPG angle of differentiating each of the four characters, with gear, suits, and upgrades that set the heroes apart from each other. Finally, in a particularly exciting twist, Gotham Knights is also available as a two-player cooperative adventure. "The game is fully playable solo, if you wish to," Marty says. "You won't be missing anything if you choose to play solo. But the team-up fantasy of two-player co-op is really important for our studio to give to players."

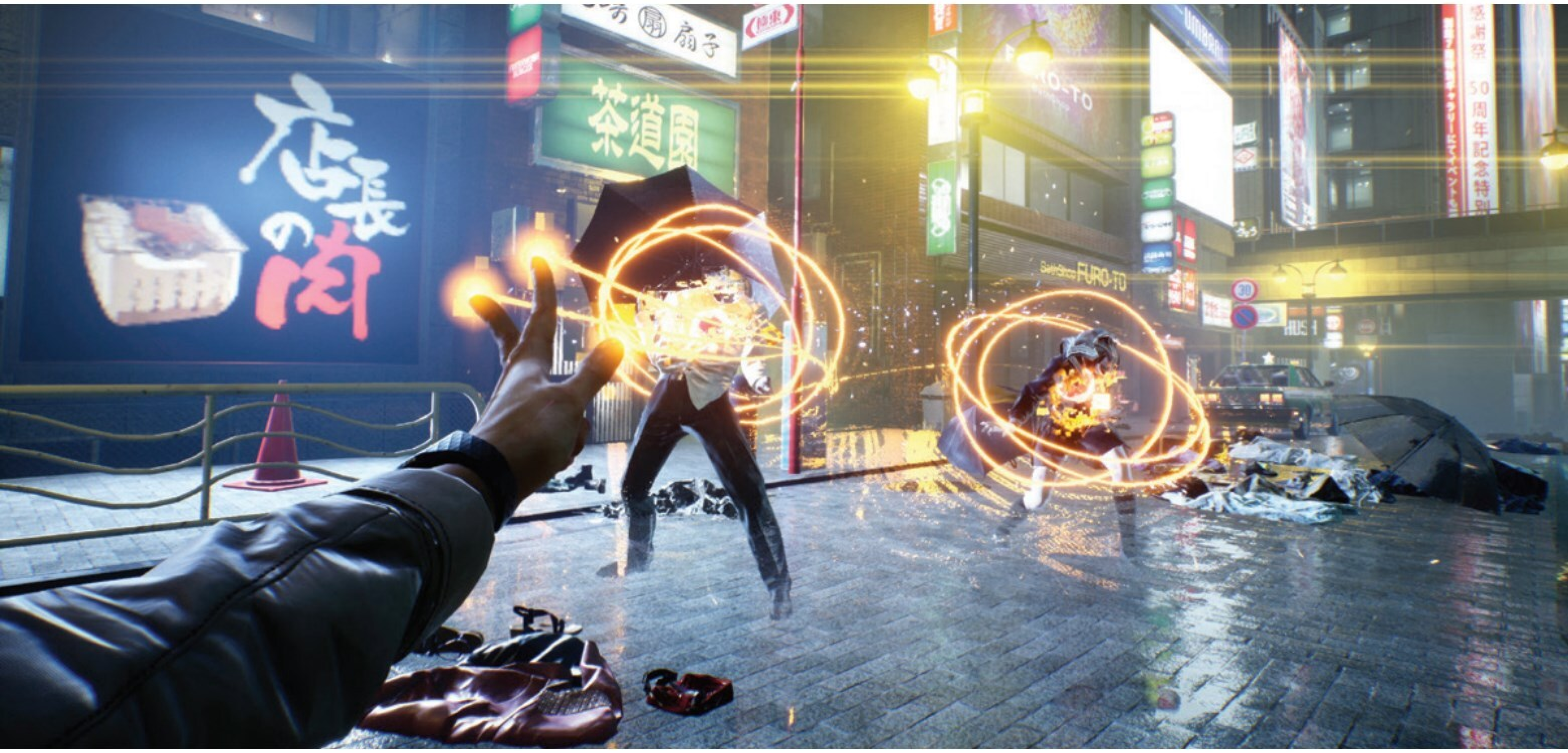
The fictional backdrop of Gotham City arose as a comic playground for Batman and his foes, but long ago eclipsed a single character's journey in its potential and scope. Gotham Knights aims to embrace that truth, leaving behind that foundational character to see what new dynamics and adventures can arise in his absence. WB Games Montreal has a challenging and ambitious task – making four heroes feel distinct and exciting – but if it manages the feat, Gotham Knights could usher one of the great comic book families into the next generation of gaming. » **Matt Miller**

Where Is Rocksteady?

Even as WB Games Montreal charts a new course with Gotham Knights, the original creators of the Arkham gaming universe at Rocksteady Studios are also hard at work in the DC universe. That acclaimed development team has announced Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League, a cooperative experience for one to four players. It is coming to next-gen consoles and PC in 2022, and stars Harley Quinn, King Shark, Deadshot, and Captain Boomerang.

Ghostwire: Tokyo

Explore an eerie Tokyo with paranormal powers



Ghostwire: Tokyo is the new game from Tango Gameworks, the studio founded by Resident Evil mastermind Shinji Mikami, which brought us The Evil Within series. In it, people in Tokyo are mysteriously disappearing and you are tasked with figuring out what's going on while using your supernatural powers to battle eerie creatures. After gameplay was unveiled at Sony's Future of Gaming event, we spoke with game director Kenji Kimura to learn more about what's in store for this creepy action-adventure game and how the PS5 is enhancing the experience.

Tango Gameworks is keeping the narrative close to its chest, but we do know an event causes the protagonist to gain paranormal abilities, which will come in handy when facing off against the threatening and unknown beings suddenly roaming the landscape. Tokyo is the centerpiece of the game, and Tango Gameworks worked hard to ensure its supernatural adaptation of the metropolis felt familiar, but was also full of surprises. "We not only wanted to add iconic landmarks and locations, but also locations that only locals might know – places that feel deep, mysterious, and interesting … the kinds of places that make our spines tingle," Kimura says. "By squeezing all these into the game, we turned the city into a surprising, original version of Tokyo that can be enjoyed by those new to the city and those that know Tokyo inside and out."

The gameplay reveal showcased a dangerous Tokyo, requiring action-packed combat, which was a different tone from the atmospheric, eerie trailer we saw previously. "Ghostwire: Tokyo is an action-adventure game, not a horror game," Kimura explains. "That being said, there will be moments of spookiness and mysteriousness. Because we are using Japan as the setting, we hope to deliver a fun experience packed with ominous, mysterious, and spooky elements based on Japanese Yokai folklore, fables, urban legends, and famous scary stories."

During the trailer, we saw an array of supernatural abilities on display, such as the protagonist chucking fireballs and reaching into enemies' bodies to rip out their cores. The latter is Kimura's favorite: "The animations and the effects combine to create this awesome feeling of ripping something out of an enemy and heightens the sense of victory against strong foes," he says. Throughout the game, you can power up the different abilities you get, catering to the ones that suit your playstyle.

According to Kimura, the gameplay loop focuses on "exploring the city of Tokyo, solving a deep mystery, and overcoming various challenges and threats through the use of special abilities inspired by traditional Kuji-kiri hand gestures." The gestures won't just be used in combat, but also in exploration to solve problems and mysteries, providing you different ways to progress through Tokyo.

Kimura also discussed how the PS5 is enhancing the experience. "The DualSense haptics and adaptive triggers felt so good that it surprised us," he says. "We could feel and experience the various actions and attacks like never before." The 3D audio also bolsters the atmosphere, but it's used for more than just immersion. "There are times players will hear not just the familiar sounds of the city but also the sounds of the supernatural. Keep an ear out and pay attention because you can use those sounds to help solve the mystery and explore the city." We can't wait to experience it for ourselves when the game launches next year.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

» Platform
PS5 • PC

» Style
1-Player Action/
Adventure

» Publisher
Bethesda Softworks

» Developer
Tango Gameworks

» Release
2021

Ys IX: Monstrum Nox

Adol takes to the city with supernatural abilities

» Platform
PS4 • Switch • PC

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
NIS America

» Developer
Nihon Falcom

» Release
February 2 (PS4),
Summer 2021
(Switch, PC)

The long-running Ys series has earned a sterling reputation for its intense, fast-paced combat. In the last entry, protagonist Adol had to uncover the mysteries of a deserted island; for Ys IX, he's getting a complete change of scenery by heading to a large city and receiving supernatural powers. We chatted with Nihon Falcom president Toshihiro Kondo to find out what's in store for our red-headed hero.

The large city that encompasses the primary setting is a place called Balduq, which holds the largest prison on the continent of Adol's adventures. "From the very start of development, the team members did not want to create a game where the action only takes place on a flat plane like it has before, but rather some had the idea that we should have wall-running and gliding to add verticality," Kondo explains. "From that, we thought a city would be better suited to the game setting rather than the natural landscapes we've seen in the previous games."

In addition to the verticality and giving more freedom with movement, the team also worked to improve the level design overall. "We didn't just create typical locations each with set enemies, but rather dynamic areas that evolve with stronger enemies tailored to the level of the characters. This is particularly evident in the town itself," Kondo says.

At the start of the game, Adol is imprisoned, and meets a mysterious woman who turns him into a "Monstrum," which is a being with supernatural gifts and the power to exorcise monsters. As the dangers and mysteries regarding this prison and a shadowy dimension mount, Adol becomes aware of other Monstrums who ally with him on his journey, and all have their own special gifts that help you traverse the city and more directly in combat. For instance, Adol has his own gift, called the Crimson Line, which lets him move rapidly to different points in the environment and even straight to enemies.It's a good way to rush baddies from afar, but it is also used get Adol out of danger. "There is also the Hawk, whose Hunter's Descent gift is necessary in fights with minimal footing, and the Doll's Third Eye gift, which allows her to perceive the unseen such as objects behind walls or even enemy weak points," Kondo says.

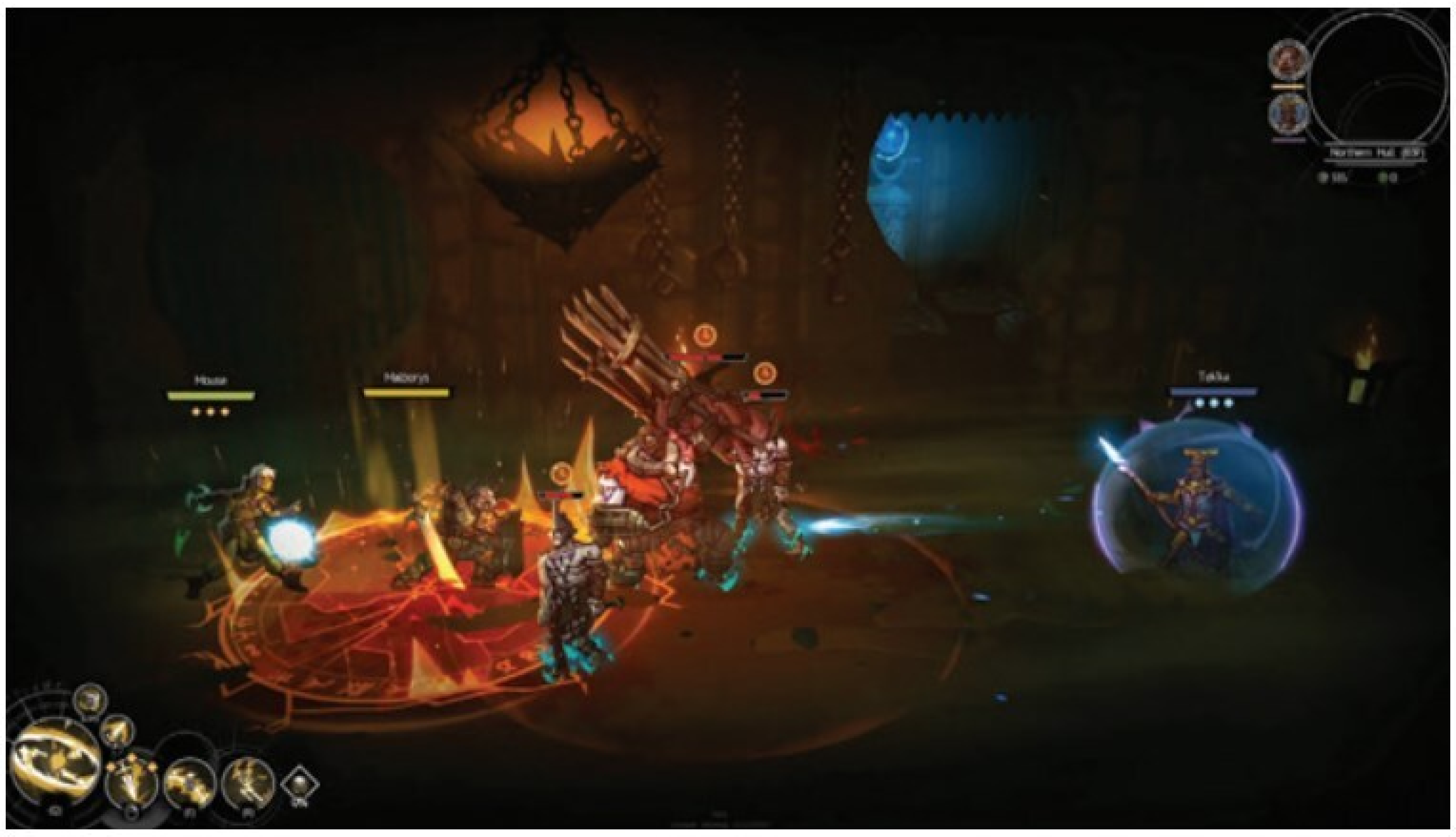
Once a Monstrum joins you, their gift is usable, no matter which character you control. In addition, each Monstrum has its own affinity for strike, slash, or pierce attacks, so you want to switch between characters to take advantage of this and defend accordingly against foes. Kondo said using Monstrum abilities to your advantage is a key element to surviving boss battles. He also confirmed the return of flash moves and flash guards from Ys VIII, which provide valuable battle perks for dodging or blocking at opportune moments.

If you liked the base-building elements of Ys VIII, you'll be happy to know Adol also has his own base of operations here, but this time it's a bar. "Ys IX is not set in an uninhabited island like Ys VIII, so there is no crafting system where you will make items from scratch," Kondo clarifies. "However, as you increase the number of allies in your hideout at the bar, you will be able to upgrade your items and equipment."

So far, Ys IX looks to be adding some more eccentric elements while also shoring up the series' weaknesses. Kondo is hoping this entry will capture even more of a Western audience. "For this game, we listened to a lot of feedback from Western gamers and challenged ourselves in the creation of the key art and the open-world elements," he says. "We are waiting with bated breath to see how the game is received in the West!" Hopefully, this is just the push the series needs. **» Kimberley Wallace**

Blightbound

Co-op crawling



» Platform
PC

» Style
3-Player Online Action

» Publisher
Devolver Digital

» Developer
Ronimo Games

» Release
TBA

Are you ready to take on hordes of ruthless undead, make your way through vicious traps, and pick up endless piles of color-coded loot? The premise may sound familiar, but the rest of the setup is anything but. In Blightbound, you take on the role of either tank, mage (healer), or assassin, and set forth into dungeons in three-player groups. Stick with the same group for more than a dungeon, and new difficulties will appear, allowing you to lay it all on the line in pursuit of legendary loot bags.

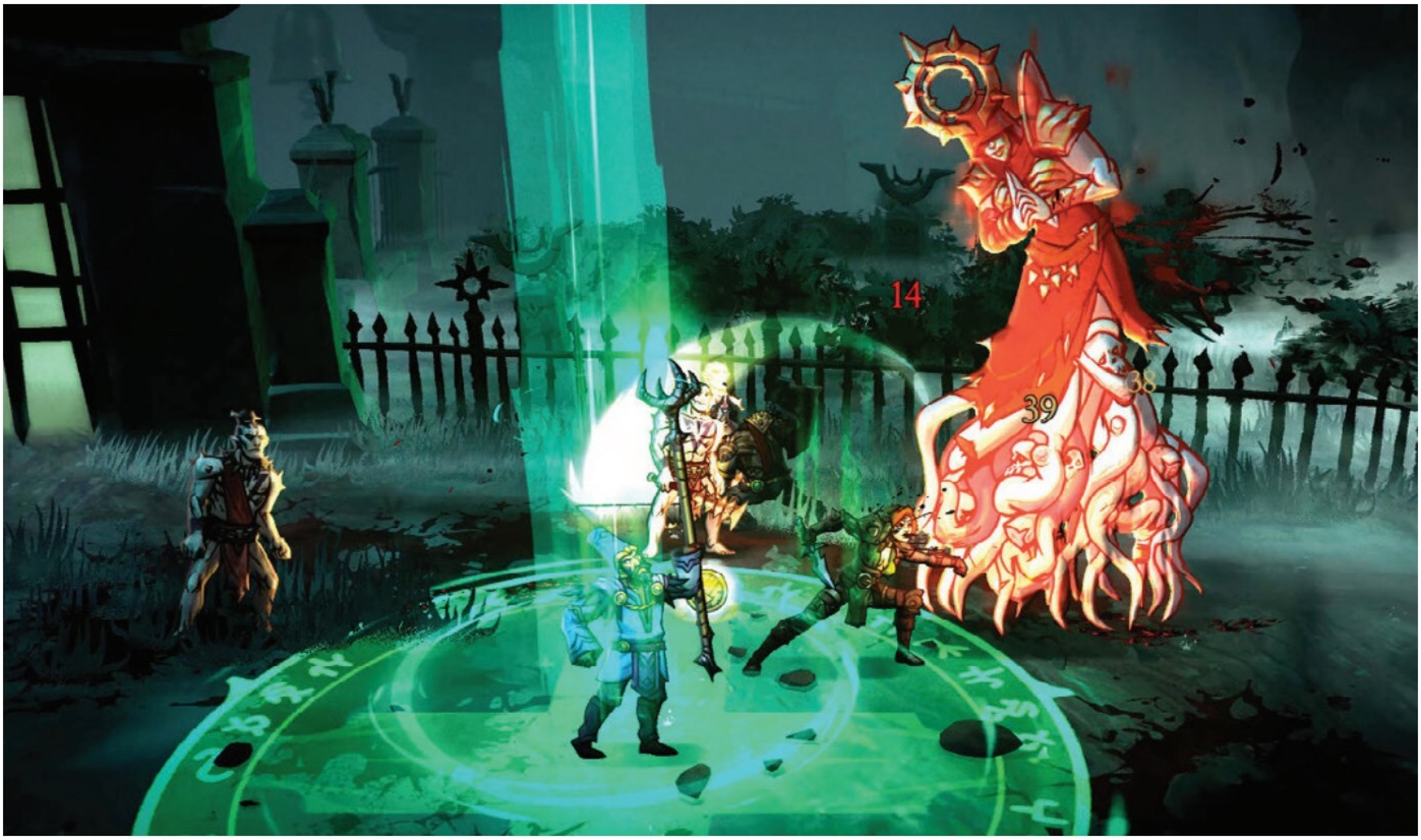
Maybe you group up with a couple of random people and the run goes to hell. That's okay. Find yourself some new party members (or preferably, friends) to get back in there and keep swinging. The stylized side-scrolling nature of the game makes it feel a little bit beat-'em-up, a little bit Diablo, and a little bit Dungeons & Dragons. If you know the "holy trinity" from MMORPGs, that's what it's all about here, so pick your favorite role and get good at it. Whether that's on the front line, shielding up and soaking damage, sneaking behind for giant critical hits, or making sure everyone stays alive, everyone on the team is important to success in Blightbound.

As you delve deeper into the dungeons, you rescue new friends that you can play as. Each archetype has several different characters, each with their own special skillsets, so you can master the barbarian-style tank or the damage-over-time rogue if you're looking for something a little spicier than the core templates.

Each dungeon has different traps to master, puzzles to solve as a team, and giant bosses. Some bosses are simple enough; just stick the tank in front and pile on the damage. Others, like the Writhing Oracle, require attentive gameplay from all members in the group. Oracle is somewhat of a MMORPG raid battle shrunk down to facilitate three players, so it's a feisty and furious endeavor. Big battles give way to big prizes, and you can snag legendaries with incredibly powerful effects, allowing you to freeze enemies on attacks or even summon permanent companion assistants.

Leveling up and customizing your ever-growing assortment of heroes back home is satisfying, but there's not a ton of content available currently in Early Access. I'm hoping Blightbound can provide more variety and a wealth of deadly dungeons to explore as it continues to move closer to full release.

» Daniel Tack



FIFA 21

Creating the plays you want

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1 to 4-Player Sports
(22-Player Online)

» Publisher
EA Sports

» Developer
EA Vancouver

» Release
October 9
(PS4, Xbox One, PC),
TBA
(PS5, Xbox Series X)

Like any competitive team, FIFA 21 is looking to consistently improve and shore up its weaknesses. Sometimes, that means looking at the core fundamentals and making some adjustments in order for the team to function in better harmony. EA Sports turned to two key places for inspiration on what to tweak for its gameplan: the real-life sport and community feedback. This resulted in bettering the creativity, responsiveness, and fluidity of its gameplay for FIFA 21. We went hands-on to see these changes in action and learn more about the improvements across all the modes.

Whether it's new techniques or improved A.I., FIFA 21 is making sure you're better equipped to create the plays you want. The standard dribbling has been improved to be more responsive and quicker, but a new, more refined technique called "agile dribbling," is also added to your arsenal; just press the right bumper while moving the left stick in the direction you want to activate it. This allows you to move the ball side to side and back and forth with ease, and it's a great tool you have to prevent yourself from getting tackled and blowing past a defender when they overcommit in a certain direction. Pulling off the new nutmeg mechanic, which allows you to kick the ball between the player's legs, is extremely satisfying. However, keep in mind, the dribbling attribute of the player you're controlling will determine how successful you will be with this more advanced technique.

A lot of effort has gone into elevating the A.I. and ensuring it's making more realistic and intelligent decisions on the field. One of the most promising new features is called "positioning personality," which strives to make players feel different depending on their position and skill attributes. From striker to fullback, every position plays differently and requires different intelligences, and likewise, every player has their own personal strengths and weaknesses. This means top forwards are less likely to get caught offside and recognize when they need to create a passing lane. Defenders are overall more likely to cut off passing lanes and the more skilled ones will recognize runs earlier, giving them a better chance to break it up. "This means that players that are good tactically are going to have a bigger impact in FIFA regardless of their pace, dribbling, and shooting attributes, which for years have been the most impactful ones," says lead gameplay producer Sam Riviera.

EA Sports also worked on its collision system to make the physical action on the pitch much more natural. Now players won't run directly into other players, trying to avoid unnecessary contact, like jumping over a sliding player. If there is a collision, EA worked to improve the physics so players won't get stuck together in large groups like in previous entries. This may seem like a minor improvement, but it does create more space and fewer pileups.

Of all of the tweaks and additions, the one that felt the most impactful and promising is creative runs. You now have more control over telling your A.I. players where you want them to go. This is a godsend for getting your players in the best spaces to execute on your game plan. Now right after a pass, you can flick the right stick in any direction and the passing player will start moving there, such as sending them to the wing or requesting they do a diagonal run. This is the first time you have 360-degree control of the run, giving you plenty of options for ways to create chances.

FIFA 21 also includes more social elements than previous entries; for the first time, cooperative play is available in the FUT and Volta Football modes in addition to tons of new events with great rewards. Career mode is also getting a long overdue upgrade, with more ways to adjust tactics during game simulations, customize players to particular roles via detailed development plans, and manage the schedule to create a healthy balance between training and rest.

During our hands-on, we noticed more consistent blocking, accurate tackles, and improved player passing, which just made everything on the pitch feel much better. Having the ability to tap into new tactics like agile dribbling and creative runs provided more spectacular ways to create plays, resulting in those special moments where you feel like you've earned a play on the highlight reel. None of this rewrites the formula, but they are all positive changes. » **Kimberley Wallace**

NHL 21

Trying to earn the celly with fancy dekes

» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X
PS4 • Xbox One

» Style
1 to 4-Player Sports
(12-Player Online)

» Publisher
EA Sports

» Developer
EA Vancouver

» Release
October 16
(PS4, Xbox One),
TBA
(PS5, Xbox Series X)

Like this year's cover star, Alex "The Great Eight" Ovechkin, EA's NHL series faces every season with lofty expectations and widespread criticism about living up to its potential. Fans hate watching the same issues carry over and want to see growth in the off-season to raise the game. EA Vancouver is addressing that in a few different ways for NHL 21, with improvements to A.I., adding more spectacular dekes to your arsenal, and giving Be A Pro mode a much-needed upgrade. It could be just enough to tide us over until the team finally transitions to creating a truly new-gen hockey experience.

While NHL 21 will be playable on new-gen consoles thanks to forward compatibility, the game was crafted with the PS4 and Xbox One in mind. The team addressed this in a recent blog post, saying: "For NHL 21, we made the decision to focus on adding innovation and new features rather than the resource-heavy task of porting the game to new console technology." In addition to this news, the game debuts in October instead of its usual September timeslot due to the transition of working remotely during the COVID-19 outbreak.

This year, EA Vancouver wants its on-ice play to match the fast speed and skill-based focus of today's game. Therefore, it's upping the offensive tools at your disposal, especially when it comes to flashy creative attack dekes. For instance, this year you can do "The Michigan," the lacrosse-style skill move made popular by players like the Hurricanes' Andrei Svechnikov, where you raise the puck from behind the net and toss it in on an unsuspecting goalie. The Lightning's Nikita Kurcherov's sweet skills are also getting a place in NHL 21, such as his no-move deke where he fakes forehand, backhand but lets the puck just slide through to fool the goalie.

Even if doing high-skilled moves isn't your thing, you have plenty of options on ways to create amazing plays this year. You can bank pucks off the back of the net for nifty passes like we saw Sidney Crosby do this year, use slip dekes to chip the puck ahead to yourself, and then there's standstill dekes, where you can windmill, toe drag, and tap deke from a standstill to quickly evade defenders. EA Vancouver said it paid close attention to improving teammate A.I., so they will better support your decisions and make smarter ones themselves when it comes to driving plays and finishing. They should be better at recognizing passing lanes, shot opportunities, and what the user-controlled player is doing.

Be A Pro is the mode getting the biggest facelift this year. You can choose to start in the CHL, NHL, or Europe, and will be doing everything from managing the press to making promises to your coach. New scenes and conversation dialogue make these moments more intense than before. A revamped hub shows you the next big event, your likeability, and various challenges to boost your popularity. A new likeability system is integral to your success and comes in three forms: teammate, management, and brand.

You'll want to take opportunities to hang out with teammates to build your bond, as this means they're more likely to pass to you on the ice and make tape-to-tape passes. Management likeability influences earning more ice time and making your way onto special teams. Getting your brand likeability up gives you more endorsement opportunities and salary bumps. These are important as they allow you to purchase perks to enhance abilities and other things that will influence likeability meters, like a house party to impress your teammates.

As far as the biggest changes go, NHL 21 also has a new mode called HUT Rush, which is more about your prowess to pull off stylish moves than grinding out a win. You get points for the more skillful moves you use, such as trying to score between the legs or pulling off a one-handed deke goal. When you score, you get multipliers up to 5x on the last three skills you used. You can play games rooted in the popular Threes mode that have money pucks and the ability to play as mascots to keep things interesting, or partake in the standard 3v3 and 5v5 setups.

EA Vancouver also added important requests, like being able to report problematic players in the game and allowing you to practice against the A.I. in EASHL. As in real hockey, you can only hope that the choices you make to shore up your weaknesses are effective each year. Time will tell if these are enough, but they're promising, at the very least. » **Kimberley Wallace**

Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes

The Suikoden spiritual successor you've been waiting for

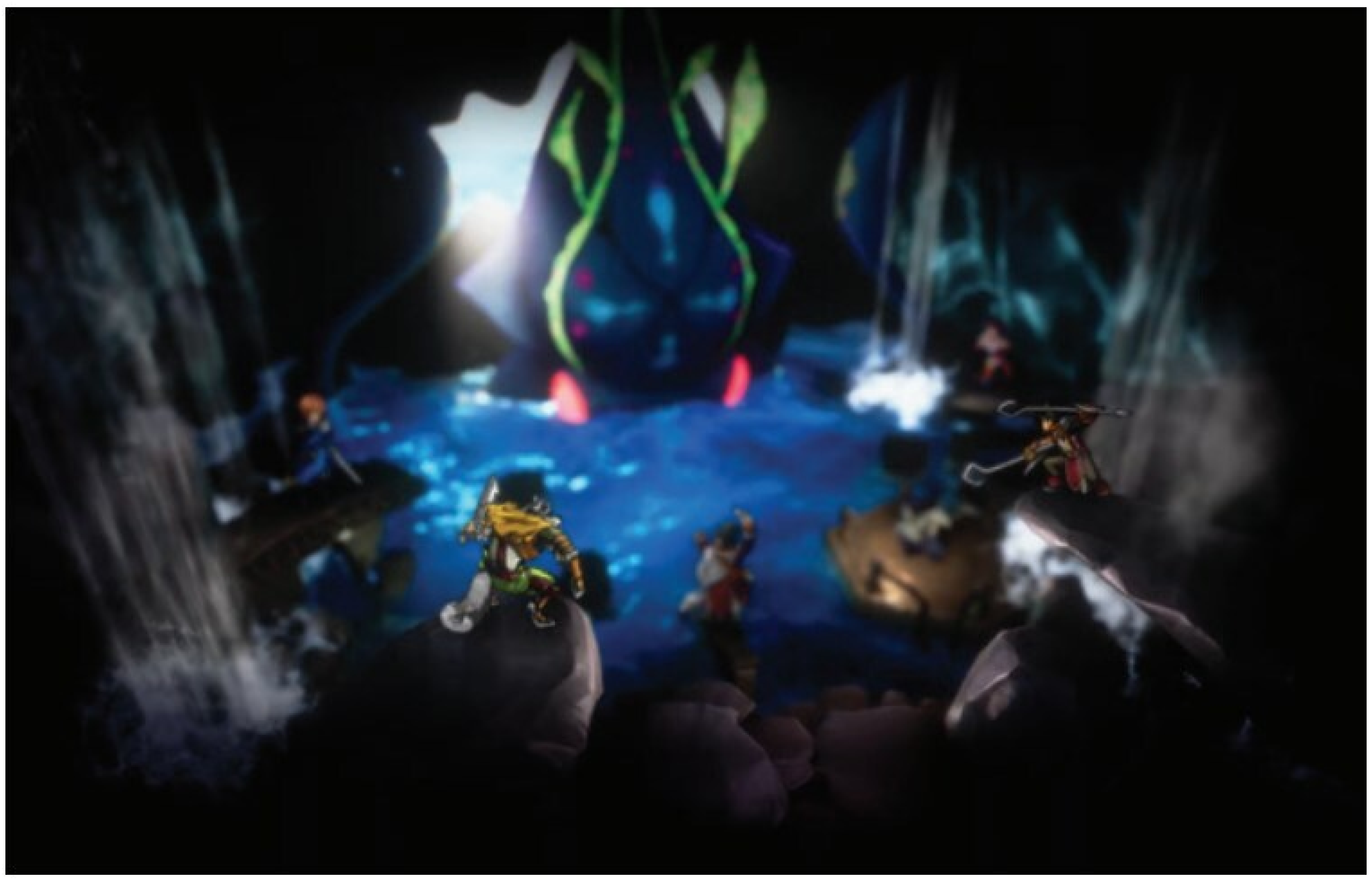
» Platform
PS5 • Xbox Series X
PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» Style
1-Player Role-Playing

» Publisher
Rabbit and Bear Studios

» Developer
Rabbit and Bear Studios

» Release
2022



The Suikoden series is best remembered for its intense political storylines, expansive character recruitment, and epic battles. The series' last mainline entry hit in 2006, followed by two spin-offs, before seeming to go on hiatus indefinitely. Through the years, fans have voiced their passion for a return, but it seemed like a pipe dream. Though we aren't technically getting a new game in that franchise, we are getting the next best thing: a spiritual successor from key talent who worked on past entries.

After launching a Kickstarter to help fund Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes, new studio Rabbit and Bear surpassed its initial funding goal within hours, knocking out stretch goal after stretch goal, such as adding a monster-raising minigame, a hot springs, and additional recruitable characters. People have shown the campaign a lot of support, and for good reason: Rabbit and Bear Studios was founded by Suikoden creator Yoshitaka Murayama, who enlisted the help of various top-tier JRPG talent for the project.

Murayama, who was the mastermind behind the fantastic and memorable Suikoden I and II storylines, is handling the narrative. Junko Kawano, who previously worked on Suikoden I and IV, is doing the character designs, while art direction and production will be handled by Junichi Murakami, best known for Castlevania: Aria of Sorrow. Osamu Komuta, whose credits include Suikoden Tierkreis and Suikoden Tactics, is leading system design and direction. To round out this stacked dev team, the soundtrack features composers Michiko Naruke (Wild Arms) and Motoi Sakuraba (Tales), among other artists.

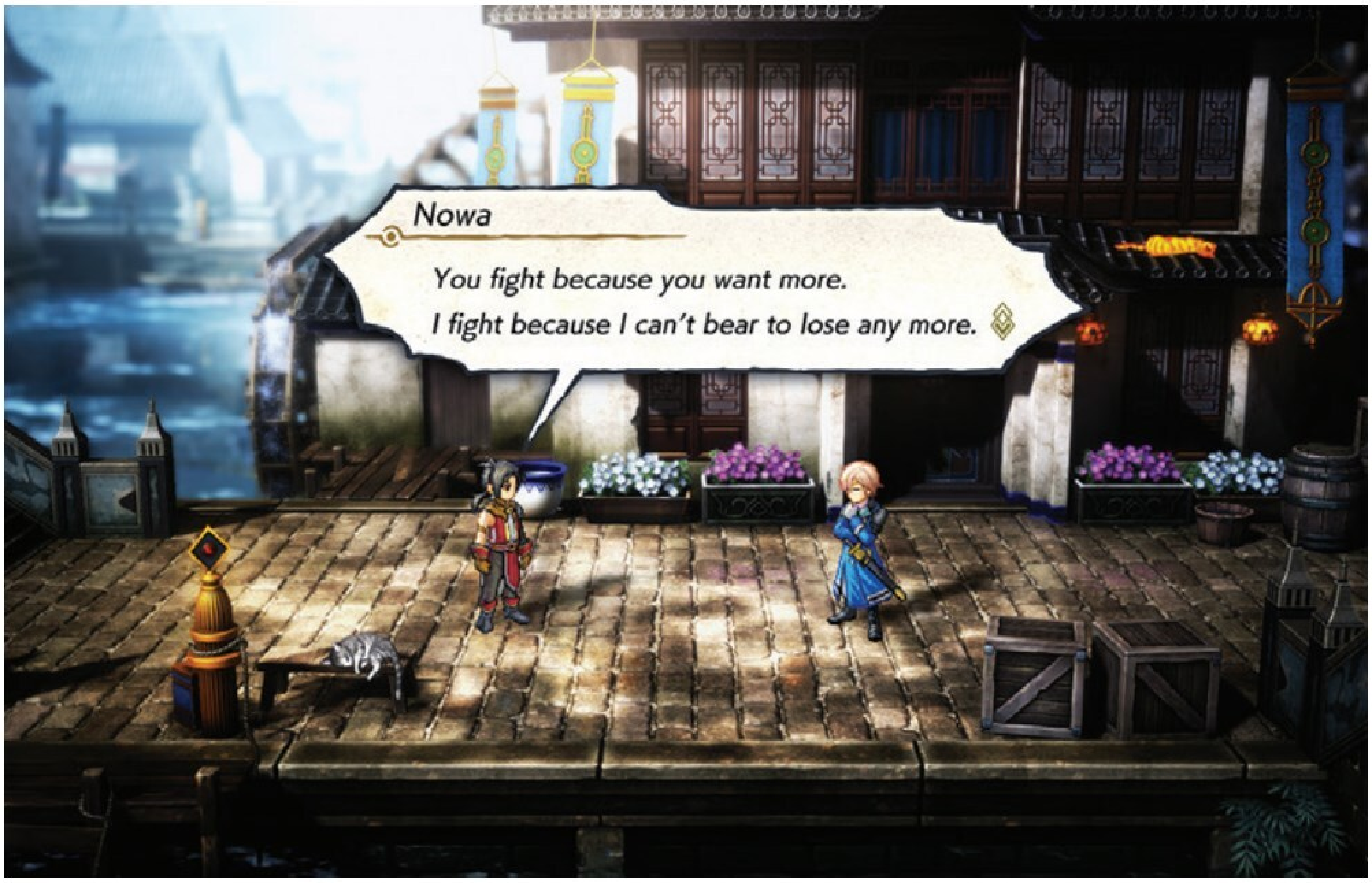
Eiyuden Chronicle aims to capture the classic JRPG exploration and battles of the PS1 era, and features all the hallmarks that made Suikoden great: a story of war and friendship, turn-based battles with six-character parties, a cast of 100 unique heroes to recruit, and a fortress-building system to accommodate your growing army. In addition, the game will feature a guild system that lets you change your fortress attributes based on the guild you join.

"In this title one of the more interesting systems is the guild system," Murayama explains. "Rather than just putting together a battle party of strong and weak, you'll have another team at your fortress town. Depending on their ability to lift heavy objects or move quickly, your production ability (and the benefits from those expansions) will change. As your guild expands it will open up unique missions and items that will make each playthrough unique."

Murayama also teased some of the narrative elements and unique friendship at play between the main characters: Nowa and Seign. On an expedition, Nowa, a boy from a remote village, and Seign, an imperial officer, cross paths and become friends, but a twist of fate drags them both into a war, forcing them to reexamine their beliefs and everything they hold dear.

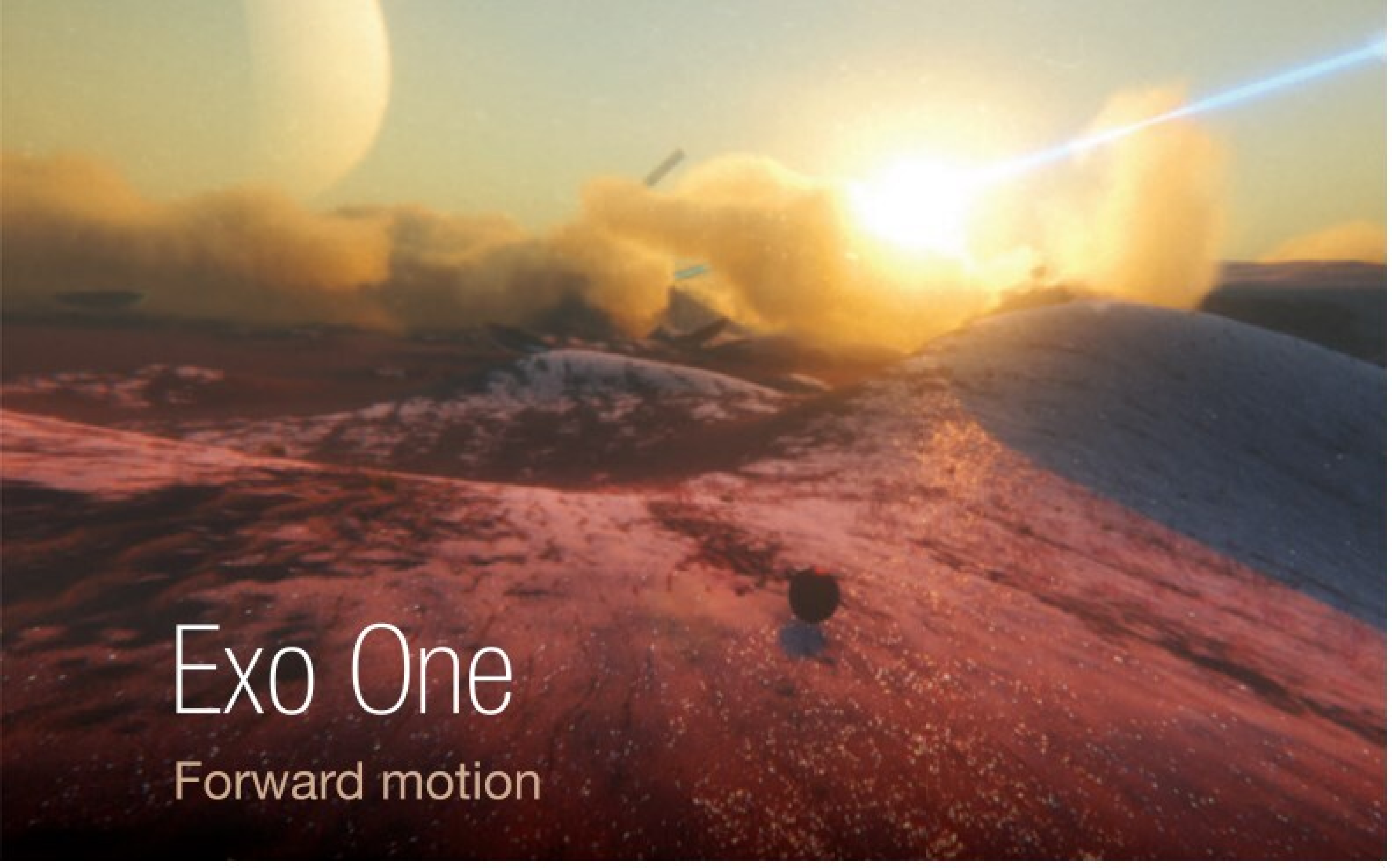
"Nowa and Seign are both key forces that expand the war in the game," Murayama says. "They are tied together by their friendship and beliefs but have opposing perspectives and responsibilities. And while they often have the same goal, the choices they make to reach that goal often differ. Sometimes that puts them on the same path. Sometimes that puts them on opposing paths. And that is one of the core cruxes of the main story."

Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes was a pleasant surprise, and its Kickstarter success has been heartwarming to see. I can't wait to see how Suikoden's classic elements get reinvented for a new generation. Murayama said it best: "I think you have to keep with the times when you develop new game systems. Some of the older design decisions are best left in the past. That doesn't mean you can't dial into some of that nostalgia while still keeping the barrier to entry fun and low. New, but familiar, is never a bad concept. » **Kimberley Wallace**



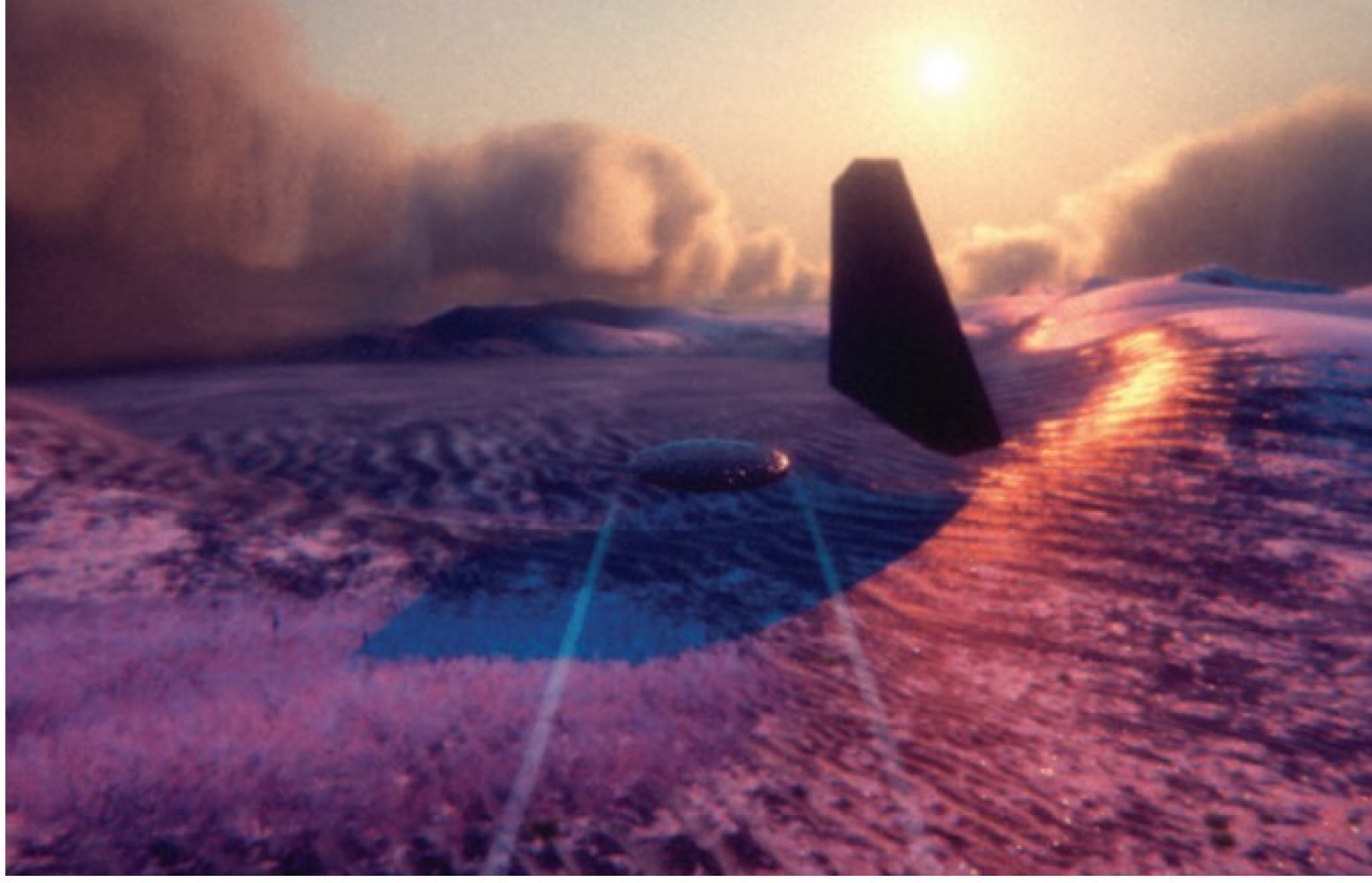
Nowa

You fight because you want more.
I fight because I can't bear to lose any more.



Exo One

Forward motion



A set of mysterious and serene alien landscapes await in Exo One, a unique title from Australian indie developer Exbleative. As the pilot of an alien craft that manipulates gravity, you must gather momentum from the worlds' various elements to increase your speed, launch upward, and discover the mysteries hidden within these gorgeous planets.

Your craft in Exo One is a distinct shapeshifter that can morph from a sphere, allowing it to roll up and down hills, to a disc for gliding through the air and skimming across the water with a pull of the left trigger. In its default state, the craft operates with lower gravity similar to that of Earth's moon; you can roll up hills with ease, coast off of them, and even perform a floaty double jump to reach new areas. However, the way to get to where you want to go fast is to squeeze the right trigger at the correct time. Doing this increases the gravity imposed on your ship tenfold, causing you to plummet toward the terrain and slide down the hilly landscape at absurd speeds.

As you load into each world, a blue beam beckons in the distance, giving you a waypoint to move toward. That blue beam belongs to a machine that can open a wormhole to the next planet, but you definitely want to fully take in the world you're on before blasting off to the next one. While the full benefits of exploration aren't explicitly defined, I did stumble upon an upgraded power source that gave me additional glide time.

The story is minimal, but through drip-fed signals between worlds, the game conveys a chilling backstory related to mankind's doomed first attempt to leave the solar system. These noninvasive scenes started as background noise to me, but the more I played, the more interested I became in learning what happened to the ill-fated mission. With a traversal system unlike anything I've ever played, Exo One sticks out as a game to watch as we near the busy holiday release season. » **Brian Shea**

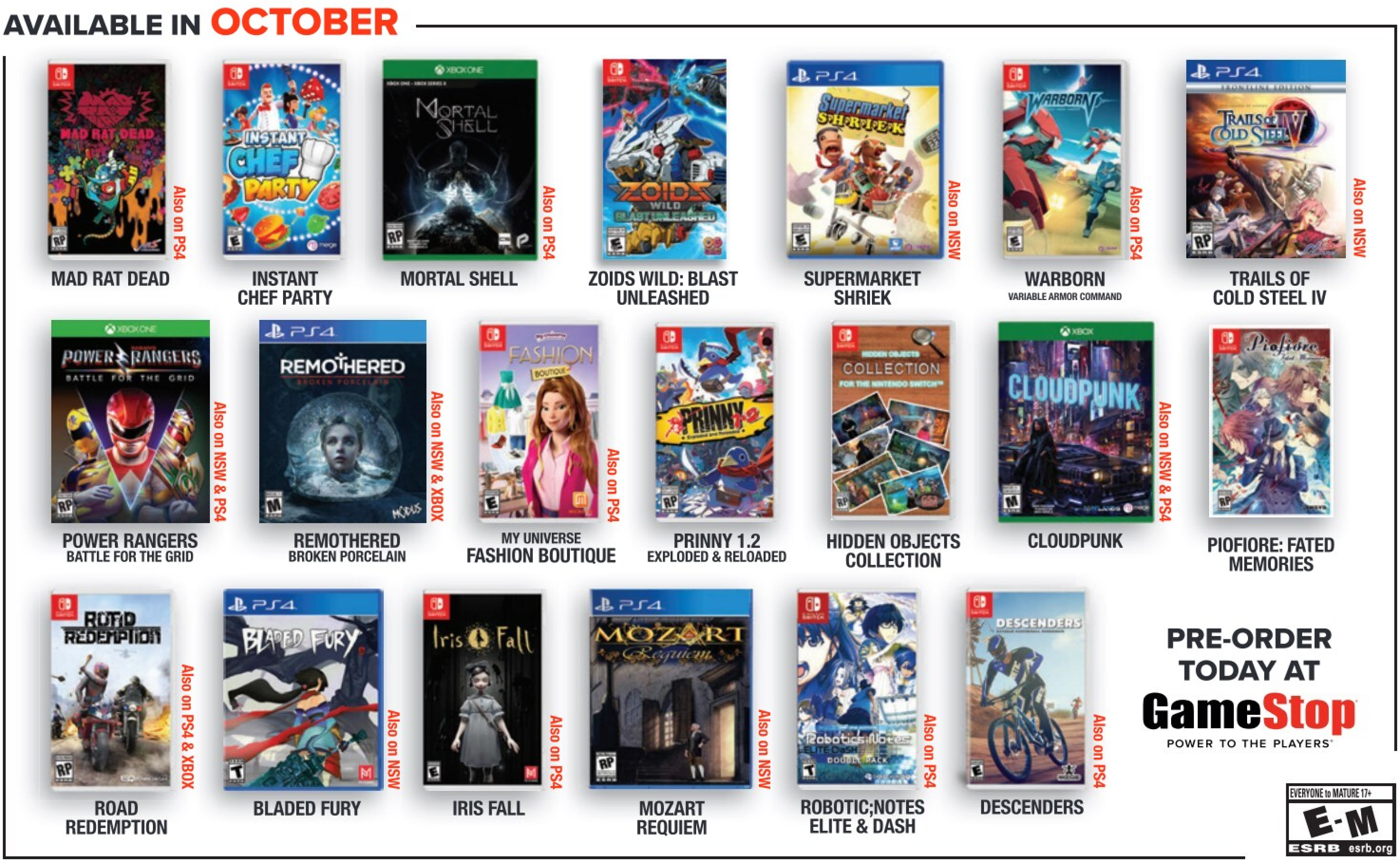
» **Platform**
Xbox Series X • PC

» **Style**
1-Player Action

» **Publisher**
Future Friends Games, Exbleative

» **Developer**
Exbleative

» **Release**
Holiday



AVAILABLE IN OCTOBER

MAD RAT DEAD — Also on PS4
INSTANT CHEF PARTY
MORTAL SHELL — Also on PS4
ZOIDS WILD: BLAST UNLEASHED
SUPERMARKET SHRIEK — Also on NSW
WARBORN VARIABLE ARMOR COMMAND — Also on PS4
TRAILS OF COLD STEEL IV — Also on NSW
POWER RANGERS BATTLE FOR THE GRID — Also on NSW & PS4
REMOTHERED BROKEN PORCELAIN — Also on NSW & XBOX
MY UNIVERSE FASHION BOUTIQUE — Also on PS4
PRINNY 1.2 EXPLODED & RELOADED
HIDDEN OBJECTS COLLECTION
CLOUDPUNK — Also on NSW & PS4
PIOFIORE: FATED MEMORIES
ROAD REDEMPTION — Also on PS4 & XBOX
BLADED FURY — Also on NSW
IRIS FALL — Also on PS4
MOZART REQUIEM — Also on NSW
ROBOTIC;NOTES ELITE & DASH — Also on PS4
DESCENDERS — Also on PS4

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EVERYONE to MATURE 17+ E-M ESRB esrb.org

New World

Amazon Games continues to try to break into the market with new games. New World is an MMORPG that tasks you with ridding the magical island of Aeternum from hideous legions of the undead, a force known as The Corrupted. New World has announced a significant delay, falling out of August 2020 to Spring 2021, with the intent of improving the experience before launch. We'll see how we fare on ferocious shores when New World hits PC next year.

Shin Megami Tensei V

Shin Megami Tensei's spin-off Persona series may be a bigger name these days, but the core franchise is still known for tactical RPG combat and complicated themes. Developer Atlus recently announced that Shin Megami Tensei V (originally revealed in 2017) will be launching in 2021 on Switch, though specific details about the mechanics, characters, and story are still mysterious. Fans have been waiting a long time, so hopefully Atlus will start releasing info soon.

The Falconeer

The Falconeer puts you on the back of a massive warbird, where you battle enemy factions and try to reclaim a hostile world. Created by solo developer Tomas Sala, these high-stakes engagements take place high above a world that's been swallowed by the open sea. Pilots can upgrade their birds through tech and magic, and the watery wasteland offers up its share of secrets to discover. Xbox Series X, Xbox One, and PC players will be able to test their mettle this holiday season.

Star Wars: Tales From The Galaxy's Edge

Following the release of Vader Immortal (which is now on PSVR), ILMxLAB is once again partnering with Oculus Studios for a Star Wars VR adventure. Called Tales from the Galaxy's Edge, players are invited to Batuu's Black Spire Outpost for an original story set between the events of *The Last Jedi* and *The Rise of Skywalker* films. No gameplay details have been shared, but the game will feature something ILMxLAB calls "storyLIVING," which allows players to experience consequential choices. Tales from the Galaxy's Edge will be coming to Oculus devices at an unspecified date.

Haven

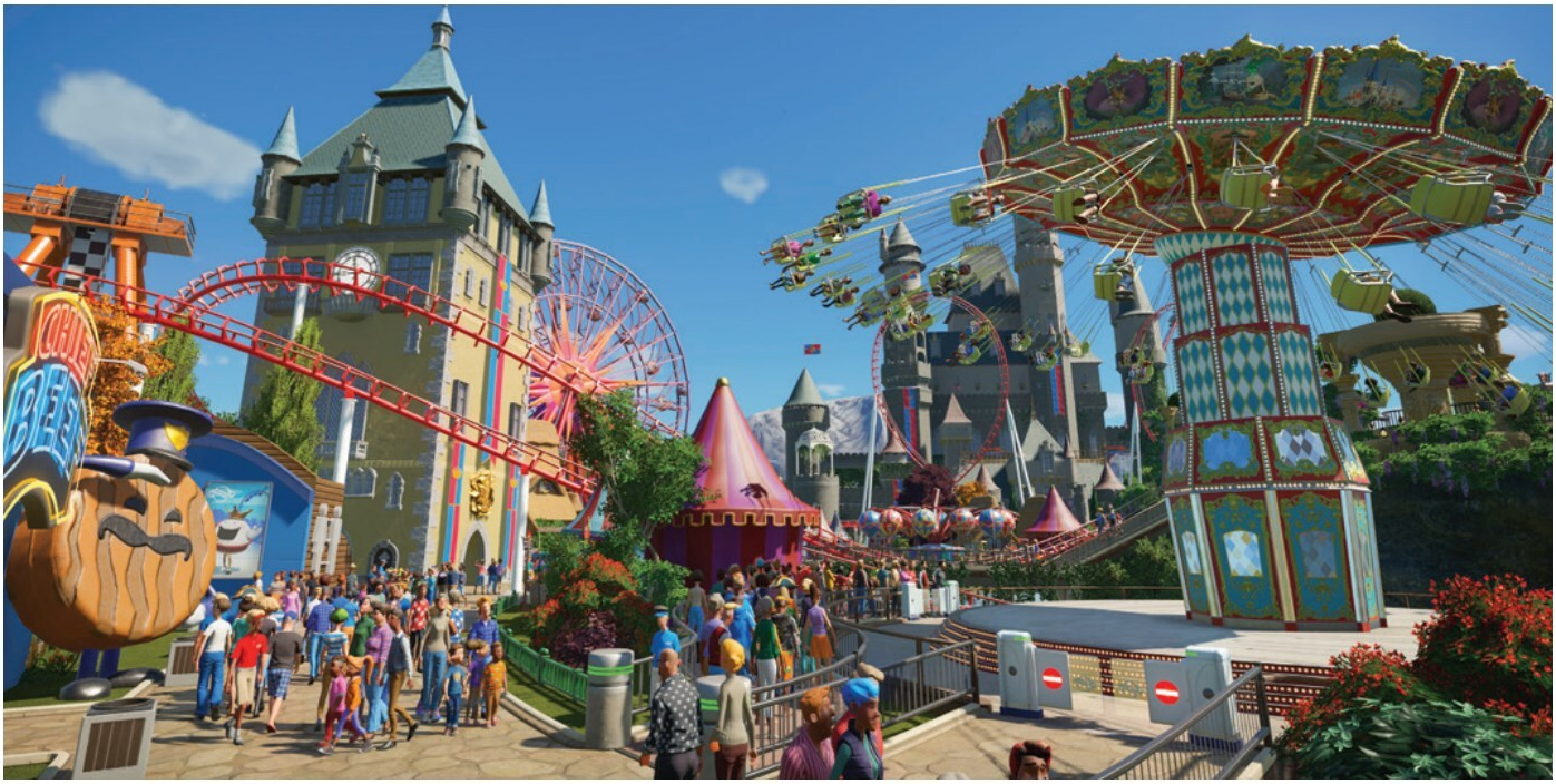
Two young people crash on a strange planet, and must balance survival and the threat of monsters with the emotional rollercoaster of young love. Part RPG and part relationship simulator, our time playing revealed fun exploration and combat, but the moments of quiet romantic conversations really set the game apart. Playable solo or co-op, The Game Bakers are aiming for release on all current and next-gen consoles, as well as PC, later in 2020.

Yu

Do you really think that they can come get us here?

Dragon Quest XI S: Echoes Of An Elusive Age – Definitive Edition

Dragon Quest XI made a big impression when it first launched on PS4 back in 2018. Since then a version for Nintendo Switch released, which included new character-focused stories and the option to change between HD or 16-bit visuals among other smaller additions like Japanese voiceovers. Now, that definitive edition is coming to PS4, Xbox One, and PC on December 4. This is the series' debut on an Xbox platform, and it will also hit Game Pass.



Planet Coaster: Console Edition

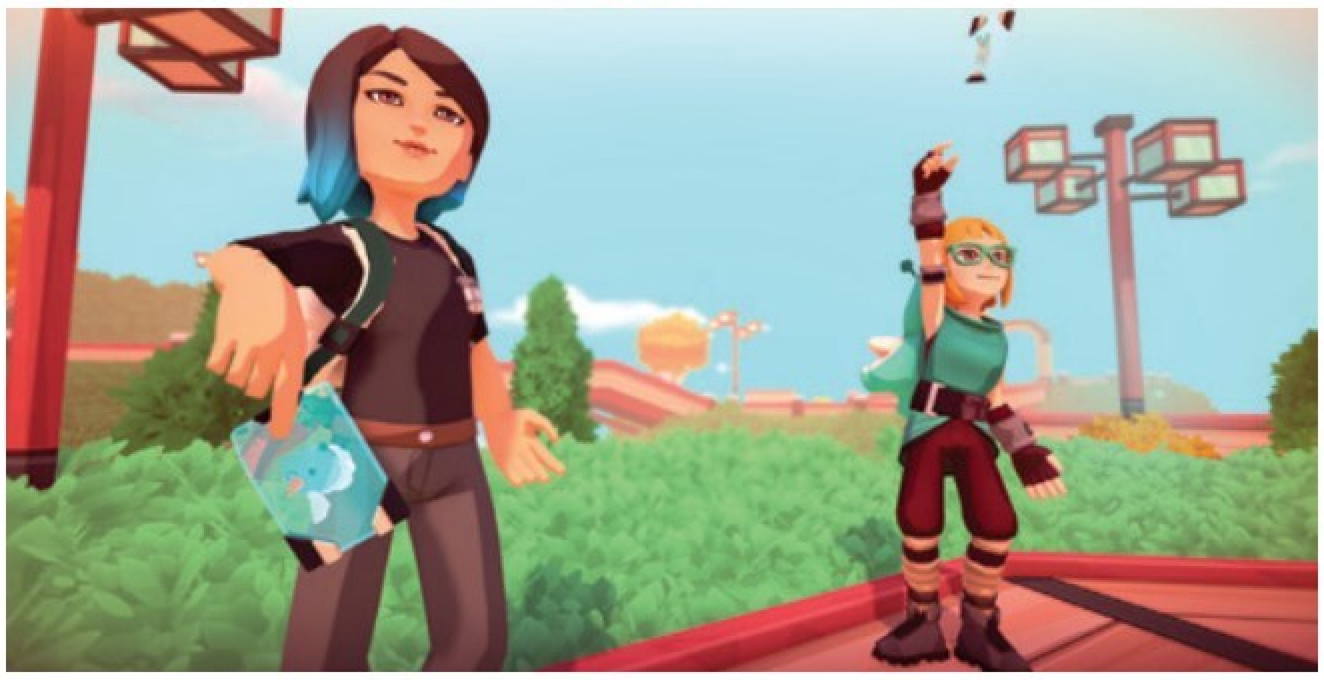
Frontier Developments is bringing the deep theme-park simulation, Planet Coaster, to the living room. The studio rebuilt the controls, tools, and user interfaces from the ground up to work intuitively on console gamepads, while also adding new voiced tutorials to help players hit the ground running. Those looking to build the theme parks of their dreams can do so on PS5, Xbox Series X, PS4, and Xbox One later this year.

Torchlight III

What was once a more MMO experience with Torchlight Frontiers has turned into Torchlight III, a more traditional ARPG. Play as a mage, a hunter, or even a train conductor. However, as early access rolls on we can see that Echtra, Inc., is attempting to forge an endgame to keep players around for ages, with player housing customization and a genie that is ready to pop endless dungeons and challengers for aspiring adventurers. Torchlight III is currently in PC Early Access, with a Switch version announced for this fall.

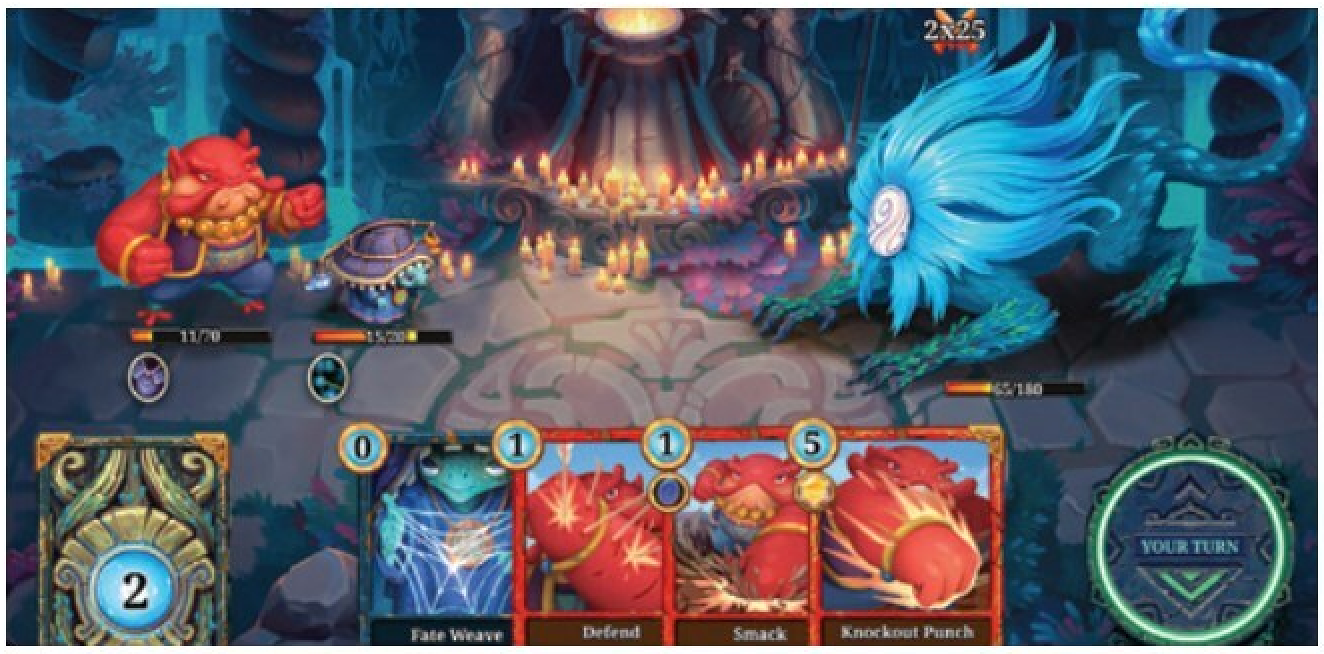
Temtem

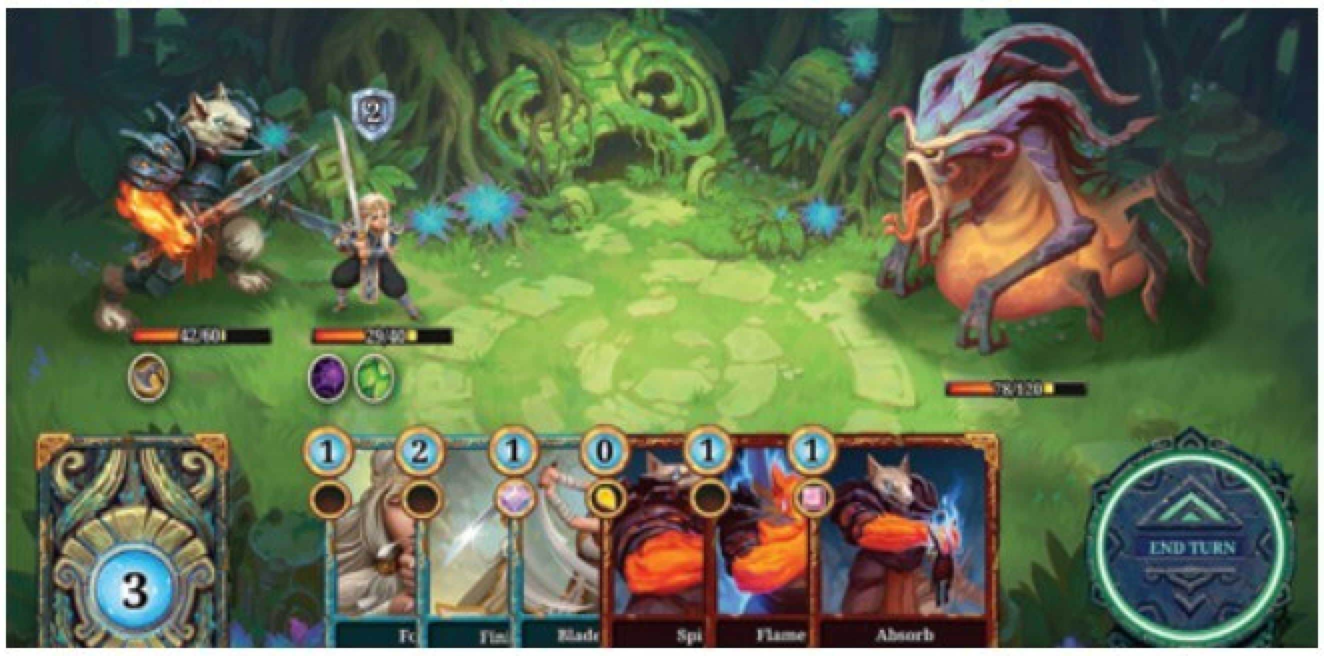
If you're looking to collect some monsters and battle with them, Temtem may be your jam. With MMO aspects like joining up with fellow trainers and seeing other players in the world as you travel, Temtem takes aim at the classic Pokémon franchise by adding in more multiplayer aspects and upping the difficulty level. You can play now in Early Access on PC, but it's headed to consoles in 2021.



Roguebook

The creators of the board game/collectible card game mashup Faeria are back, and tackling the roguelike card-based RPG. If you're a fan of games like Slay the Spire and Monster Train, Abrakam's upcoming journey through their established fanciful universe is one to watch. Upgrade your deck as you traverse mystical environments with an assortment of heroes, but watch out for nightfall, as something vicious may hunt you down. Look for Roguebook on PC in May next year.





Hello Neighbor 2

Mr. Peterson returns, as does his creepy old house, but he isn't the primary threat in Hello Neighbor 2, the sequel to the popular title by TinyBuild Games. This time around, players assume the identity of Quinten, a journalist who is investigating the disappearance of people in Raven Brooks, including Mr. Peterson. As Quinten looks for clues in Peterson's house and the larger neighborhood, he is stalked by a mysterious threat that looks part alien and part crow. Hello Neighbor 2 is slated to release on Xbox Series X, Xbox One, and PC in 2021.

Pikmin 3 Deluxe

Nintendo continues its trend of bringing the Wii U's best games forward with Pikmin 3 Deluxe. This upgraded version hits Switch on October 30 with all previously released DLC, the ability to play the entire story in two-player co-op, and a new set of side-story missions featuring Olimar and Louie exploring planet PNF-404. This version also adds new difficulty settings, lock-on targeting, elective hints, and the option to play at a more relaxed pace. ◆

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 329

76 Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout

Fall Guys is goofy, glorious fun distilled into a series of chaotic elimination bouts. While the obstacle courses could use a little more variety, this lighthearted take on the battle royale is just what the genre needed. Dressing up your bumbling bean in a variety of ridiculous costumes and slamming headfirst into doors with your friends is a boisterous social event that invites repeat sessions.

THE SCORING SYSTEM

10	Outstanding. A truly elite title that is nearly perfect in every way. This score is given out rarely and indicates a game that cannot be missed.	5	Flawed. It may be obvious that the game has lots of potential, but its most engaging features could be undeniably flawed or not integrated into the experience.
9	Superb. Just shy of gaming nirvana, this score is a high recommendation because the game reviewed is head-and-shoulders above its competition.	4	Bad. While some things work as planned, the majority of this title either malfunctions or it is so dull that the game falls short as a whole.
8	Very Good. Innovative, but perhaps not the right choice for everyone. This score indicates that there are many good things to be had, but arguably so.	3	Painful. If there is anything that's redeeming in a game of this caliber, it's buried beneath agonizing gameplay and uneven execution in its features or theme.
7	Average. The game's features may work, but are nothing that even casual players haven't seen before. A decent game from beginning to end.	2	Broken. Basically unplayable. This game is so insufficient in execution that any value would be derived in extremely small quantities, if at all.
6	Limited Appeal. Although there may be fans of games receiving this score, many will be left yearning for a more rewarding game experience.	1	No price. No release date. No worries.

Wasteland 3

A cold day in hell

Style 1 or 2-Player Role-Playing **Publisher** Deep Silver **Developer** InXile Entertainment **Release** August 28 **Rating** M

Wasteland is a series about survival. As one of the Rangers, your journey takes you to frigid Colorado, where the Patriarch needs your help reuniting his incredibly messed up family in the city of Colorado Springs. Do you help the highly questionable despot for the good of the people? Maybe you recruit some of his kids and crush dad's legacy. Hell, maybe you just kill everyone and take over the city yourself, Ranger creed be damned. Wasteland 3 is about constant, meaningful choices. The story is set in a dystopian, post-apocalyptic world, and over the course of a playthrough, I both loved and hated my decisions, which rippled from character to character and faction to faction.

Combat is clean, smooth, and easy to understand in terms of movement and actions – an improvement over Wasteland 2. Everything comes down to action points. Firing a rocket launcher costs you more exertion than shooting a pistol, for instance. Executing a special move costs more than moving a tile. Cover is critical to defending yourself from the endless hail of bullets and beams, so choosing where to end your turn becomes an important tactic. Your effective range is nicely highlighted in the UI, so you know exactly where to move and still have the resources to attack with a stellar 88 percent chance to hit. You may cry when you miss and the enemy chops you in two with a giant machete, but hey, that's what save files are for.

You can create four playable characters to use and also recruit two NPCs, who you can also customize – but they have their own morals and allegiances. If you push them too hard, they may bail on your crew. You have a solid pool out there to recruit from, but if you're like me, you will get attached and balance your behavior to facilitate their needs.

Determining how to approach every situation matters, both in and out of combat. I had a varied crew of experts ready for all kinds of situations. My character Duck is a master of the mallet, can walk over mines, and launches rockets with the best of them. Another one of my allies is an expert sniper who can target specific body parts and talk amazing trash – scaring enemies into submission and ending fights before they even begin. And that's just the start of the choices in front of you.

Eventually, I created a master ace with pistols who could fry the circuits of any robots I encountered with expert CPU shots, turning them against their masters. Skills that don't involve combat can save your life, allowing you to deftly handle everything from tripwires to drunk bar patrons. From lockpicking, sweet-talking, sneaking around, and even repairing toasters, every point you allocate is significant, and it's a ton of fun agonizing about every skill point you place.

The world is mostly open, and you're free to roam around in your Kodiak vehicle to find random encounters, oodles of side-quests and locations of interest, and other random shops and map popups. You can even use your vehicle in combat where situations allow and find a ton of upgrades for it, both functional and cosmetic. If you're a brazen explorer, you can push the boundaries hard and probably end up being buried in the snow a few times, but that's also how you find cool and powerful upgrades. Random encounters are mostly annoying, but you can eliminate them through the use of the survival skill.

Upgrading your Ranger Headquarters is one of the most satisfying aspects of the adventure. Unlocked almost immediately, your base is a run-down trash heap that you turn into an amazing bastion, full of functional and important services like a medbay and armory while housing tons of characters. Your interactions with the people there have significant and subtle effects on how things play out in your eventual ending.

Wasteland 3 makes you feel the weight of your actions in an unforgiving world. No good deed goes unpunished, and sometimes no choice is the right one. The post-apocalyptic world is broken, and so are most of the people in it. Sometimes, you won't feel the repercussions of your actions for many, many hours, when a questionable decision can come back and change everything. Characters you befriend in the early hours could become enemies as your journey nears its end, and emptying a souped-up plasma cannon into one of your once-trusted pals is more chilling than the endless snow covering the ground outside.

Wasteland 3 is a bit rough around the edges at times. I had various characters bug out and refuse to interact with me without a game restart, sound skipping and looping, and massive slowdowns in combat that also required a reboot. Given the scope of all you can do, these issues are mostly forgivable, and they don't cause irreversible damage to the experience.

Wasteland 3 is a solid CRPG, tasking you with decisions both minute and massive as you carve your legacy into Colorado. Will you serve the Patriarch for the greater good? Will you join forces with his psychotic son? His rebellious daughter? Or will you just roll around in the snow looking to pick fights with Scorpitrons? They're all worth doing, so suit up and roll out for some wild times in the wastelands.

» **Daniel Tack**

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Restore Colorado to a semblance of society, or burn the whole system down

» **Graphics**
The isometric environments can feel washed out and drab, but details pop out and make looking at your armor, weapons, and gadgets fun

» **Sound**
From gun reloads, cool tunes, battle shrieks, and fully voiced encounters, the sound contributes to the immersion

» **Playability**
The systems are complex, but traditional CRPG fare. An easier difficulty setting is provided for those looking to experience the story without too much punishment

» **Entertainment**
The world is yours to shape and form however you choose. While a bit rough around the edges, the exploration and discovery entertainment is top-notch

» **Replay Value**
High

Madden NFL 21

Playing it safe

7.75

Style 1 or 2-Player Sports (6-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Tiburon **Release** August 28 **Rating** E

PS4 • Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Send essentially the same team as last year (with a few minor upgrades) back on the field for another season

» **Graphics**
Madden NFL 21 looks good on the field, but visual glitches on the sidelines and in the endzone celebrations rip you right out of the experience

» **Sound**
The commentary is mostly solid, but has a tendency to meander and completely ignore context

» **Playability**
The new Skill Stick gives you more control than ever before, and the small-but-noticeable gameplay upgrades across the board improve the experience

» **Entertainment**
Despite meager upgrades this year, Madden NFL 21 still delivers solid on-the-field action for football fans

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

Each year, every team must take a look at what it currently has and compare that with what it needs in order to achieve its goals. This year, EA Tiburon used its offseason to fine-tune gameplay, add a new arcade-style experience, and upgrade its career mode. But much like a middling football team, Madden NFL 21 isn't quite ready to make a run at postseason glory.

Stepping onto the field with your teammates, calling plays, and working together to come out on top remain exciting. The on-field action, which was largely solid last year, has only been improved upon. I love the new Skill Stick for pass rushing, allowing you to be more fluid with your attempts to blow past the offensive linemen. While it's not as revolutionary for ball carriers, the Skill Stick gives you more control over the moves you pull off when you're evading would-be tacklers. Defenders are more aware and precise in getting you to the ground in this iteration, and my offensive players were more likely to outstretch their arms to reach a close first down, adding realism and alleviating some frustration from previous years. These improvements are small, but they go a long way to making play across all modes more enjoyable.

The cinematic career mode, Face of the Franchise, returns with an expanded pre-NFL experience, but the longer high school and college preamble just delays your journey to the NFL. The story and presentation are woefully unaware of what's going on; it was laughable that even when I was blowing out every team by 50 or more points there was still a battle for the starting job. On the narrative side, the story is full of unlikeable characters, ranging from your snippy friend and rival to your terrible-at-pep-talks college coach, and the faces in the cutscenes are definitely meant to be covered by football helmets.

Once you make it into the NFL, the mode thankfully picks up. Rather than playing every game, Face of the Franchise puts you in three or four pivotal games per season that play a significant role in determining your legacy. These important moments are presented through narrative story arcs. I loved navigating these arcs, which range from leading a stacked team of star players to the Super Bowl to dealing with a performance-hindering injury, but I was often annoyed by how little my performance actually contributed to my team's season. These arcs present you with fun scenarios off the field, such as trash-talking your rival to get a stat boost (but also firing up a key defender), or answering a question in a press conference about a teammate to affect their morale. However, even in the NFL, the narrative struggles to acknowledge what happens on the field; my all-time great run with the Ravens ended abruptly when the team decided to replace me with an awful backup.

While Face of the Franchise received myriad changes, the series' standard franchise mode has been largely neglected. Taking command of a team in hopes of creating the next great dynasty remains thrilling, but I'm disappointed by the lack of upgrades. This is often my go-to mode in Madden, but it feels nearly identical to the offerings last year.

ORUWARIYE
33
24

You can create an online league to take franchise mode into the multiplayer realm or immerse yourself in the card-based Ultimate Team mode with options like seasons and MUT Squads, but Madden NFL 21's online suite remains largely focused on quick one-off competitions. From standard head-to-head multiplayer to the rapid-fire, 5-minute Superstar K.O. mode, you can certainly still step into the online suite with the mindset of getting your fix and moving on without any long-term commitment.

Madden NFL 21 also introduces The Yard, a mode inspired by backyard football, where it's 6v6, modified rules, and all players play both sides of the ball. I enjoy the callbacks to the style of football I played with family and friends as a kid. Since there's no offensive line, the quarterback can't scramble unless a defender blitzes, with the defense operating on a "One-Mississippi" rule for crossing the line of scrimmage. Toss other elements not found in the NFL, like trick plays with multiple passes, directly snapping the ball to any player on your team, and stylish behind-the-back throws and between-the-legs catches, and The Yard aptly differentiates itself from the action on the NFL gridiron. While the mode delivers unique offline challenges to complete and fun head-to-head online play, the customizable nature of the players' outfits often makes it difficult to differentiate the two teams.

Each time you jump into a game, you select a prototype, which essentially acts as a loadout for your player in that game. These prototypes are modeled after some of the NFL's biggest stars like Lamar Jackson and Odell Beckham Jr., and level up as you use them. I loved adding additional skills to my favorite prototypes, but the drip-feed of unlocks and the ambiguity of what I was actually earning – both with prototypes and the mode's cosmetics – made it less rewarding.

Sadly, several immersion-breaking visual glitches occur across all modes, including invisible players on sidelines, players teleporting before your very eyes to snap into a touchdown celebration, and players constantly walking into and clipping through each other post-play. These hiccups aren't confined to the field, however, as even the cutscenes and menus feature flickering text, repeated dialogue, and my Face of the Franchise player having the wrong college listed on his profile despite the lengthy college-focused portion of that mode.

Those looking for a huge step forward in the EA Sports' football franchise won't find it with Madden NFL 21. However, despite its lack of major upgrades, Madden NFL 21 is still a mechanically sound and fun football game. » **Brian Shea**

Fall Guys: Ultimate Knockout

Ridiculous revelry

8.75

EDITORS' CHOICE
ISSUE 329

Style 60-Player Online Action **Publisher** Devolver Digital **Developer** Mediatonic **Release** August 4 **Rating** E

PS4 • PC

» Concept
Participate in a variety of obstacle courses and events as a goofy bean

» Graphics
Stylish and a bit bizarre, the art style sells the experience

» Sound
Playful emotes and the incessant chirping of other beans accompany the peppy soundtrack

» Playability
Incredibly easy to pick up and play, but with plenty of room to master the tricks for each course

» Entertainment
Fall Guys is a masterful mix of party and prowess, held back only by lack of variety and a few lackluster games

» Replay Value
High

With the finish line in sight, a hamburger makes a leap of faith through the slowly spinning windmill. Unfortunately, a milkshake waits behind the scenes and hurls the hapless hamburger out into the void, sending him back to an earlier checkpoint. Somewhere across the obstacle course, a gaggle of beans tilts a see-saw platform the wrong way, sending a dozen players off into the sky. Elsewhere, a unicorn in a tutu cheers. Embracing the ridiculous and the fun, Fall Guys is a party-game battle royale, and it's something special. Clearly inspired by shows like *MXC*, *Ninja Warrior*, and *WipeOut*, Fall Guys leans into its high-impact insanity and inspires laughter every step of the way.

You and 59 other players take on a wide variety of minigames to cut the field down to one lucky winner. Despite the winner-take-all endgame, you can form a team with up to four players, which allows you to group up with your buddies during team events, which is cool. Rounds are fast, and it's no big deal if you lose. You can watch your friends play it out or head back to the lobby to join another game instantly. Many rounds are obstacle-laden races that have you tilting on seesaws, smashing into doors with your face, and outrunning slime. Team games like mini-soccer and ball-racing combine with other strange fare like breakaway walkways to mix up the experiences further. All stages are not created equal, and some of the games end up being filler (the memory game!) or frustrating, especially the team experiences.

The core gameplay of Fall Guys is an absolute blast. Slamming into a wall as a babbling little bean wearing a duck costume is as fun and as stupid as it sounds, and appreciating the wacky physics as you are pushed, prodded, and flung across the stages is highly enjoyable. Being the last one holding the flag (tail) or making it up the mountain to the crown for a victory is exhilarating and intense without being too stressful. Belting the soccer ball into the goal with a perfect dive feels wonderful, as does being the last bean standing when the collapsing hex platform drops.

Even when you're eliminated early, you don't really lose; you're sent back to the lobby with some currency to buy cosmetics. You can use this money to become a pineapple. Or a dinosaur. Chase your dreams, little bean. Watching the hours melt away is easy as you master each course and soak in the dumb fun. After you've memorized the position and behavior of every wrecking ball and spinning hazard, you can engage with another layer of gameplay by messing with other players, grabbing them and trying to get them stuck on walls, bump them off edges, or hold them in place.

Just learning how to jump on a balance beam or dive to break your fall are rewarding lessons, with each course having a generous amount of "advanced" play available after you figure out the best ways to tackle the standard goal. Of course, some of the best laughs come when perfect plans end up going horribly wrong as other beans interfere, intentionally or just by happenstance. It's all in the name of feeling good at the end of the day, and witnessing the pileups of assorted beans when everyone tries to squeeze through the same door is downright hilarious.

A lack of variety is the greatest weakness in this otherwise excellent game. After a few hours of play, you will probably have seen it all, and maps start to feel stale despite the many emergent player-initiated hijinks. A few games, especially some of the three-team competitions like the egg-hoarding one, reward beating up on the losing team, which is an unpleasant (though surefire) way to win. While some degree of randomness is essential to the party game experience, many of the team games feel like you have no agency or impact on winning or losing at all, which doesn't feel good.

Fall Guys doesn't take itself too seriously, and it's hard not to grin after a few rounds of delightful diversion. Whether by yourself or with friends, this refreshing and ridiculous game makes every triumph and failure into a celebration. » **Daniel Tack**

Spiritfarer

The long way home

Style 1 or 2-Player Simulation **Publisher** Thunder Lotus Games **Developer** Thunder Lotus Games **Release** August 18 **Rating** T

Most simulation games are designed to go on forever. Even after you have passed all major milestones and achieved every meaningful upgrade, you can continue gathering resources and accruing wealth. The machinery of the world still runs, even if it has no clear goal. Spiritfarer is different. It's an engaging story-driven management sim with a clear beginning, middle, and end. However, its bittersweet narrative also highlights the theme of recognizing when it's time to move on.

You play as Stella, a recently appointed Spiritfarer who ferries the souls of the dead to their next phase of existence. As you sail across a colorful 2D world, you bring these aboard your boat, then fulfill their various requests until they are ready to leave. They may want to visit specific locations, eat their favorite foods, or see new amenities on the ship. The premise is simple, but giving the spirits what they need involves a gradual escalation of refining resources and building new structures. This is Spiritfarer's central gameplay loop, and even though it's satisfying, the process is filled with an unfortunate amount of busywork that wastes your time instead of enhancing it.

At the beginning, your boat is sparsely equipped, and creating what you need is easy. When you need linen thread, you build a garden, grow some flax, harvest the fiber, and then complete a quick minigame at your loom to weave the thread. You have a wide array of items to craft, so managing multiple lines of production and optimizing your ship layout is a lot of fun in Spiritfarer's early hours. However, as the requirements get more complicated, those "quick minigames" pile up; performing simple button presses to work bellows, hammer glass, and crush seeds is boring, especially considering how often you need to repeat these tasks to create the resources you need. A second player can control Daffodil in local co-op to split these tasks up, which eases the burden but still doesn't make the chores fun to complete.

While the crafting itself gets old, seeing the results of your effort remains rewarding. Your small ship grows into a sprawling naval village, complete with orchards, farm animals, and places for your spirit companions to live. I had fun arranging and rearranging the different buildings, unlocking new blueprints, and sailing to every corner of the world to find useful items. Your destinations are usually small side-scrolling islands with light platforming challenges, and because time passes in a day-night cycle, I fell into a happy routine of setting my course, then running around my ship to perform upkeep in transit. Until the credits rolled after nearly 30 hours, I always had an interesting upgrade or task to pursue.

Most of your passengers take anthropomorphic animal forms, like a bird or lion, and they wander around and make the boat feel like a community (and ask you for food constantly, which gets annoying). Each one has a distinct personality and story that unfolds through dialogue and quests, and advancing these tales is how you progress through Spiritfarer's different acts. I appreciate how this gives the journey a structure beyond the usual "build stuff and get rich" motivation, but most spirits feel like embodiments of general concepts rather than fully realized characters. For example, you meet a philandering lion and an old hedgehog with a failing memory, but your interactions with them are more about what they represent than their personal stories, which can make it difficult to get invested in them as individuals.

The spirits' broad characterization is not always a bad thing. Spiritfarer is ultimately about the process of saying goodbye, and because the cast embodies different elements of the human experience, their arcs have a universal and relatable quality. This is especially apparent during the spirits' farewell scenes, in which Stella rows them to the door that leads to whatever happens next. With the benefit of full retrospect (and Stella's assistance), they are able to confront their lives in sad and poignant exchanges full of optimism, regret, and patience. These scenes are excellent payoffs to the time you spend with the spirits, and I looked forward to each one.

You encounter a limited number of spirits in your travels, and seeing their stories is your primary incentive to continue. Once that task is done, it's time for you to say your own goodbye to Spiritfarer. Even though you can technically keep sailing around after the credits, that feels unnecessary. The journey is complete, and I was satisfied by that sense of closure. Despite occasional rough waters in the pacing and characters, Spiritfarer is a voyage I will remember fondly. » **Joe Juba**

8

PS4 • Xbox One Switch • Stadia • PC

» Concept
Ferry spirits to the great beyond while refining resources, exploring the world, and upgrading your boat's ever-expanding capabilities

» Graphics
Vibrant settings and expressive animations lend cinematic flair to the world and characters

» Sound
A solid score sells the otherworldly and playful atmosphere, and the voicework is limited to brief exclamations rather than full dialogue

» Playability
Simple controls make basic navigation easy, but the various minigames get tedious quickly

» Entertainment
Spiritfarer taps into the fun of farming/lifestyle simulations, but adds a unique story layer that sets it apart

» Replay Value
Moderate

PGA Tour 2K21

A sweet swing

8

Style 1 to 4-Player Sports (4-Player Online) **Publisher** 2K Sports **Developer** HB Studios **Release** August 21 **Rating** E

PS4 • Xbox One
Switch • PC

» Concept
The Golf Club series has a new identity, but hasn't changed its pro swagger on the links

» Graphics
You can read the course easily, but no details stand out as beautiful. Animations are rough, and crowds rarely react correctly to the situation

» Sound
The commentary is repeated often, and some of their calls happen before the ball completes its path

» Playability
The analog swing is excellently crafted and the courses play well. Nicely designed options also allow you to move away from realistic to arcade play

» Entertainment
While excelling with the clubs, the character-specific unlocks aren't great, and you're mostly just playing for score

» Replay Value
Moderately high

PGA Tour 2K21 is a sure shot, hitting the green with the precision and finesse of a pro. Whether you are swinging away with heavy lumber from the tee to win a championship or are chipping out of a bunker to save par, the stroke play is beautifully crafted. It is also fully malleable, allowing players to achieve a realistic game where they are battling hooks and slices, or an arcade experience where every approach is within a whisper of the pin.

PGA Tour 2K21 may be a new video game series under the 2K Sports banner, but the nuts and bolts behind it are well worn, being tested and refined for years within The Golf Club series. The same development team behind those successful games is making PGA Tour 2K21, and they've further elevated their craft in this new release without sacrificing much. That series' wonderful links play and course creator are back and better than ever. The PGA tie-in plays out in a big way here, such as playing on 15 championship courses against PGA pros who eventually become your rivals.

The entire experience is backed by an excellently crafted analog swing that demands timing and fluidity. You see how your motion plays out in real time through a handy meter. You may feel you hit the ball perfectly, but the meter knows better, and you see just how off you were. The meter gets in your head, and you may second-guess what motion you need to use. When you factor in wind and difficult-to-read terrain, making a perfect shot can be challenging. I struggled for a few rounds, and hooked the ball more than I care to admit until I found a rhythm and a way to hold the controller to reduce the curve. You can get better clubs, but success and failure fall directly onto how well you swing and putt, which is how it should be.

The courses put up good fights and are true to their real-life counterparts. I haven't golfed on any of the real courses, but just knowing that this is an accurate recreation is cool, since you take part in the same challenges the pros face. A lot of the courses are built with risk and reward in mind, such as sand traps surrounding a nice stretch of fairway 300 yards out.

Should you go for the big shot and miss your mark, hitting the ball into the rough can lead to a bit of frustration. Getting out of the tall grass delivers mixed results, such as some shots coming up well short of where they should, even on perfect swings. It becomes a bit of a guessing game that can led to an extra shot on an approach, which never fares well in close tournaments.

The career mode takes you on a tour of some of PGA Tour's big events (including the FedEx Cup), just without much pageantry. The presentation, celebrations, post-tournament analysis, statistical depth, and commentary (which is highly repetitive) all come up short. I do like the cutaways that show you the big shots made by other players, but they take too much time to load, and can take your mind out of a shot you were preparing for.

The character creator also doesn't offer up much depth, so I wasn't able to create myself accurately, but I did have an awesome time making my own courses. The creation tools work well, and give you a surprising amount of flexibility. One of my holes brought about a new golfing challenge: a dozen alligators on a green. On the next hole, the airspace above the pin was blocked by a giant, hovering airplane. I basically made a PGA minigolf course. You can also auto-generate courses that can then be tweaked or played in full, so there's a lot of depth here.

If you struggle in any aspect of your game, HB Studios has loaded up on variable options, including six difficulty levels for the swing – the lowest giving each shot a perfect trajectory (although the wind will still push it). Easing the swing mechanic can lead to much quicker matches, delivering an arcade-like experience similar to the Hot Shots or Mario Golf games. You can use these settings for the entire PGA Tour career, but cannot compete with them online, an area where pro-level skills are required.

If you want to play with friends, you can dive into great social community options, allowing you to search and join existing spaces, or build your own where you can invite your friends to partake in tours and tournaments. Some societies require virtual currency donations to join, but thankfully, you can also choose from plenty of free ones.

PGA Tour 2K21 certainly has areas that could be improved, but the golfing – the heart and soul of the experience – is exceptional, and can make you feel like a pro when you make perfect shots. HB Studios' expertise in this sport shines and helps this new series get off to a hell of a start.

» **Andrew Reiner**

Tell Me Why

Too much left unanswered

Style 1-Player Adventure **Publisher** Xbox Game Studios **Developer** Dontnod Entertainment
Release August 27 (episode 1), September 3 (episode 2), September 10 (episode 3) **Rating** M

Developer Dontnod doesn't shy away from difficult topics, even if it means some missteps along the way. On one hand, this is admirable; the studio has helped push the medium forward in the stories it tells, exploring challenging subjects like mental health and racism. On the other hand, this is new territory, and there's still plenty to learn. Tell Me Why showcases this quandary; Tyler breaks new ground as a transgender protagonist, but Dontnod also delves into topics such as grief, panic disorder, and the importance of therapy. For all these steps forward, this game still stumbles with some portrayals and plot holes.

Tell Me Why centers on twins Tyler and Alyson, who are brought back together after being separated for a decade. While happy to be reunited, the occasion hits a somber note since they must prepare to sell their deceased mother's house – which also means confronting the tragic event that caused her demise and separated them years ago. Tyler and Alyson's bond is powerful and sincere, and I enjoyed every scene between the two of them, whether it was just banter or facing their difficult past. Dontnod does a great job at surfacing memories that showcase how special their relationship is, since they only had each other growing up.

While Tyler and Alyson's exchanges are what make the experience, the same can't be said for the overall story. It has a good amount of suspense and tension as you try to figure out what really happened with their mother, but Tell Me Why's three-part arc moves at an over-accelerated pace. Relationships feel rushed, especially when it comes to romance and forgiveness.

None of this is more apparent than when trying to uncover what type of person the twins' mother really was. She ends up feeling more like a plot device than person due to unexplained details, and even in the end, you never really get any satisfying answers. I won't spoil anything, but her story is full of plot holes, especially in terms of her mental well-being, and it's a shame Dontnod didn't handle this aspect better considering its sensitive nature. That being said, the writers do a much better job with Tyler; the story touches on him being transgender, but it's not the focus. The tale strikes a good balance between acknowledging this part of him but not letting it overshadow or define the journey of confronting his mother's death.

The road to acceptance has you exploring Tyler and Alyson's small hometown in Alaska and making choices as they recall memories from their past. Dontnod takes the twins' intense connection one step further by giving them a special ability to hear each other's thoughts and view their recollections from the past together. In many ways, you are chasing their memories as they surface, which sometimes leads to finding a necessary item or new clue. I liked this aspect because it showcases how two people can remember the same event differently, and it fits well with the overall theme of reflecting on how the past shaped you as a person.

However, there's one part of Alyson and Tyler's special ability that didn't work for me. At certain moments in the story, the twins remember events a bit differently, such as if a character seemed angry or sad during a heated exchange. You then pick whose memory you want to believe. It feels like you're being forced to invalidate how the other character feels, or just choosing the version you want to believe over finding the truth. This isn't about coming to terms with the events, and I found the mechanic more frustrating than worthwhile, like it was unnecessarily pitting the characters against each other.

The choices in Tell Me Why feel more subtle and less impactful compared to Dontnod's past work, and I felt like I didn't have as much agency over the story or events. Your decisions factor into Alyson and Tyler's relationship and how they choose to move on with their lives, but the differences are minor.

When you're not making dialogue choices, you encounter minor puzzles and minigames, which are also very hit or miss. I loved ice fishing and solving the riddles, but examining graves to find a person or searching archives by remembering file names are more tedious than fun. One cleverly implemented mechanic is helping Alyson get on track during a panic attack by looking at an app that you tap to regulate her breathing.

Tell Me Why doesn't exactly answer the question it poses in its title, and maybe that's the point. Even so, I came away with mixed feelings by the end. I really enjoyed getting to know Tyler and Alyson, and I felt the suspense and intrigue of figuring out this larger mystery, but it also disappointed me. This was only further illustrated in the ending choice, which is just absolutely awful in terms of how it's presented and how the characters rationalize it in the scenes that follow. It doesn't end on a strong note, and what's in between is full of highs and lows. The highs make it worth playing, but just expect to be shaking your head when those low points hit.

» **Kimberley Wallace**

7.75

Xbox One • PC

» **Concept**
Reunite twins after a decade to clear out their deceased mother's house and stir up painful memories in the process

» **Graphics**
Alaska provides a beautiful and serene backdrop for the twins' journey, even if the graphics aren't that impressive. The facial animations and dialogue syncing could use some work

» **Sound**
Dontnod has a flair for finding great music to support its characters' emotional plights. Outside of a few awkwardly delivered lines, the voice acting is natural and well done

» **Playability**
Straightforward controls make exploration and conversations easy to maneuver, but selecting items when they're close together using a controller can be frustrating

» **Entertainment**
Tell Me Why shines brightest when it's focusing on the powerful bond between twins Tyler and Alison, but the overall story and memory mechanics don't ever reach the same high bar

» **Replay Value**
Moderate

UFC 4

Another worthy title defense

Style 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online) **Publisher** EA Sports **Developer** EA Vancouver **Release** August 14 **Rating** T

8.5

PS4 • Xbox One

» **Concept**
Refresh career mode and revamp gameplay to deliver another strong outing for fight fans

» **Graphics**
The fighter likenesses are vast improvements over those of UFC 3, and the grappling animations are more fluid this time around

» **Sound**
Every strike sounds crisp as it connects, and despite some misfired calls, Jon Anik and Daniel Cormier are a well-matched commentary team

» **Playability**
Overhauled striking controls make throwing down easier than before, while the all-new submission minigames make grappling a much more approachable affair

» **Entertainment**
With a retooled career mode, strong upgrades to gameplay, and the fun Blitz Battles online mode, UFC 4 delivers a complete package

» **Replay Value**
Moderately high

The sport of mixed-martial arts is a fickle and ever-evolving entity. Strategies and skillsets that got you a championship a few years ago could lead to a string of defeats today. UFC 4 takes the lessons of the athletes it portrays seriously, building upon the strong foundation of UFC 3 in some places, while going back to the drawing board and completely revamping its approach in others. The result is another outing worthy of wrapping the title belt around its waist.

The timeless concept of two fighters punching, kicking, and grappling their way to victory has never been more realistically represented than in UFC 4. With its improved control scheme, modifying strikes to be heavier or flashier is as simple as holding the face button for longer. Standing up and striking with your opponent continues to be an edge-of-your-seat experience, with progressive, localized damage throughout the bout, as well as the potential for flash knockouts with well-timed strikes; I jumped off my couch in shock as Conor McGregor ended my championship run with a counter left cross.

If you'd prefer to settle things on the ground, the grappling system is also improved. Clinching with your opponent and shooting for takedowns now feel like natural extensions of the stand-up experience, taking into account locomotion to determine success. Once you're on the ground, the new grapple assist system lets you select the outcome you want and the game does the rest. While this option is handy for casual players, I quickly changed the controls back to the legacy scheme since I like controlling exactly which positions I take on the ground.

Perhaps the most welcome improvement is the addition of new submission minigames. The old system is replaced by two intuitive sequences where the attacker must cover the defender's bar as the action plays out behind the overlaid user interface. With two different minigames to complete depending on if you're in a joint-manipulation or a choke submission, the processes feel different, and do a great job of blending player skill, fighter attributes, and fatigue to determine the outcome.

The offline offerings include one-off fights in traditional MMA, Stand and Bang, and Knockout mode (with a new health-bar system that mirrors that of traditional fighting games), as well as custom events and tournaments. However, the destination for offline play is career mode. This year's career starts off more cinematic, as you work closely with your head coach to learn how to fight, rack up some wins, and make the jump to the professional circuit. Once you're finally in the big show, the primary goal is to win a championship en route to becoming the greatest of all time. Fighting up the ranks is more exciting than ever, as fighters more accurately mimic the behavior of their real-life counterparts, making each opponent feel unique; Khabib Nurmagomedov's pressure fighting makes you feel like you're suffocating, while Justin Gaethje brings his wild-swinging firefight approach into the Octagon.

Planning for these contrasting styles is important in the lead up, and UFC 4 overhauls its training camp system to give you more options. You can spend your time watching tape of your opponent to learn their moves and tendencies, promoting your fight through social media and public appearances, or putting in work at the gym. Training is now less menu-oriented, with sparring serving as the focus, which I vastly prefer over the repetitive system of last game. I love how your fighter's moves evolve based on how much you use them, while you can round out the rest of your skills by inviting other athletes to train with you or manually improve your attributes through skill points you earn in the gym.

A big part of getting your fighter's name out there is through social-media interactions. Some of these involve answering questions from commentator Jon Anik, while others are fighters in your division calling you out. I like being able to respond to them in respectful or taunting manners to build relationships and rivalries, but I'm disappointed in how the system seems to fall off once you reach the top of your division; when you're champion, you should have more athletes shooting their shot with you, not radio silence.

In the online suite, Blitz Battles sticks out as the star. This mode pits you in a rapid 64-player tournament with rulesets like a one-minute-long fight or a best-of-three Knockout mode match. I love how if I lose in these get-in-get-out tournaments, I can just jump right back into another in hopes of a better result.

Whether you want to challenge the best in the world online or simply claim your throne in career mode, this is a terrific next step for EA Sports' MMA franchise. UFC 4 effectively evolves its gameplay and career mode, giving you more than enough reason to step back into the Octagon. » **Brian Shea**

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the score

8 Necrobarista

Platform PC **Release** July 22
Rating NR

Necrobarista tells a meaningful story about relationships and the memories we create with the people around us. It's heartwarming, poignant, and pulls at the heart strings in all the right ways. ***– Kimberley Wallace***

8.75 Superhot: Mind, Control, Delete

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC **Release** July 16
Rating T

You're still clearing rooms of heavily armed enemies, but now you have access to myriad gameplay modifiers and new abilities within a roguelike format, elevating this sequel beyond the original. ***– Brian Shea***

7.75 Panzer Paladin

Platform Switch • PC **Release** July 21 **Rating** E10+

As throwback retro adventures go, it hits a lot of the right marks, even if some of those targets are ideas that might have been best left in the past. ***– Matt Miller***

7.25 Hyper Scape

Platform PS4 • Xbox One • PC
Release August 11 **Rating** T

Despite its solid shooting, smart upgrade systems, and embrace of verticality, Hyper Scape struggles to keep the "one more try" battle-royale sensation pumping through players' veins. ***– Daniel Tack***

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photo: courtesy of Netflix documentary series High Score

ALIENATED

Howard Scott Warshaw was blamed for killing the game industry. He should be honored

by Ben Reeves

Howard Scott Warshaw loved computers, but as soon as he started his job at Hewlett Packard in the early '80s, that love started to slip away. The best parts about computer programing and engineering became drudgery inside the walls of the computer-hardware giant. Warshaw wanted to make a change, but he felt trapped. Then, one day, a friend told Warshaw about a young video game company headquartered in his own backyard of Sunnyvale, California. That company was Atari, and it had built an industry making games that could be played on television sets. From that moment on, Warshaw knew he was going to do whatever it took to work at Atari, even if he had to bully his way through the door.

"I wasn't even that into video games," Warshaw says. "I just thought, 'Wow. I'd like to work at a place where I'd be having more fun.' I talked my way into an interview, and they were doing the kind of work I specialized in, so it seemed like a match made in heaven ... and then they rejected me. When they called me to give me the rejection, I was actually sitting at my desk [at Hewlett Packard] with my manager 10 feet in front of me, and I started arguing with the hiring manager at Atari … We went back and forth over a number of things, and ultimately I wore him down."

Warshaw might not have been Atari's first pick, but he eventually proved his worth; the young programmer's first game, Yars' Revenge, went on to become a beloved classic. Yars' Revenge was one of the first games to feature multi-layered sound effects and a full-screen explosion. To pull off some of Yars' Revenge's unique visual tricks, Warshaw actually loaded the game's source code into the Atari 2600's registers. It was an inspired bit of programming and a trick that allowed Yars' Revenge to produce visual effects that hadn't been seen before.

"I think every one of my games was groundbreaking in some significant ways," Warshaw says. "Yars' Revenge is the first video game with a pause. Nobody had put a pause mode into a game before that. And why would they? The first thing you do in a new medium is copy the successes in the previous medium. So the first thing they did with home games was copy coin-op games, and nobody would ever put a pause in a coin-op game because you don't want to stop the flow of quarters, you need to turn people around to keep coins dropping."

In the late '70s and early '80s, Atari was notorious for its wild, party-like atmosphere. Early on, Atari founder Nolan Bushnell would hold keg parties and hire live bands to play for his employees after work, which established a laidback corporate culture. By the time Warshaw arrived on the scene, the smell of marijuana continually wafted through the halls as employees stripped down to jump into the company hot tub. There seemed to be no end to the kinds of mind-altering substances Atari's programmers would consume, even while on the clock. For Warshaw, who had just come out of a strait-laced corporate environment, it was almost overwhelming.

"For me, what was stimulating creatively wasn't so much the drugs – though I don't think they hurt – but what was stimulating to me was the people I was around while we were doing the drugs," Warshaw says. "Those people were amazing. It was like a bunch of weird, wacky molecules bouncing off of each other and off the walls, and as the temperature went up with the pressure, there was more interaction and more volatility. It kept you on your toes … But the greatest drug at Atari was being able to go into a store and see your game on display and then to see kids fighting over the controller to get a chance to play – that was the best high at Atari."

Warshaw continued to chase that high while working on the officially-licensed Raiders of the Lost Ark game. Not only is Raiders considered the first video game based on a movie license, but it went on to become another one of the Atari 2600's classics. During development, Warshaw purchased a 10-foot bullwhip, which he says helped him get into the Indiana Jones mindset. During breaks, he would walk the halls at Atari and crack the whip, startling his coworkers. Around the same time, Warshaw met with film director Steven Spielberg, so when it came time to adapt Spielberg's next blockbuster into a game, Atari knew who to call.

"Late in the afternoon, one day, I got a call from the CEO, and he says, 'Hey, we want you to do E.T. Can you do it for September 1?' Which was only five weeks away. I said, 'Absolutely, I can … provided we reach the right agreement.' And I talked myself into another dumb thing," says Warshaw.

Warshaw was given only five weeks to make E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial for the Atari 2600. For comparison, most games of the era took 6 to 9 months to complete. Warshaw had to work day-and-night for over a month straight to complete this project. The finished game was a bit simple as players controlled the alien E.T. as he searched a series of pits for electronics that could be combined into an interplanetary telephone. The gameplay was incredibly tiring and its visuals were simple even for an Atari game, but considering the production constraints, the fact that that E.T. functioned at all is impressive.

Unfortunately, E.T.'s release coincided with the video game crash of 1983 – a large-scale recession in the market that resulted from a flood of low-quality games on retail shelves. Over the course of a couple of years, industry revenues fell from more than $3 billion to barely $100 million, and several video game manufacturers went out of business or filed for bankruptcy. The industry eventually rebounded with the release of Nintendo's NES, but that took years. Meanwhile, Warshaw's game received a great deal of backlash. E.T. certainly wasn't a good game, but it became the poster child for the kind of low-quality products that led to the industry's collapse.

Sadly, E.T. was the end of Warshaw's career at Atari, who moved on to producing a few documentaries before finally going back to school to become a psychotherapist. Warshaw's history at Atari is marred by the release of E.T., which is unfortunate because his work on Yars' Revenge and Raiders of the Lost Ark was foundational. In a way, we owe a debt to the designers and engineers, like Warshaw, who helped pave the way for our modern video game landscape.

"My time at Atari was amazing and it was very productive and it was creative, but we were launching a new medium," Warshaw says. "That doesn't happen that often. You know, we go from records to tapes to 8-tracks to CDs, but it's still music, right? Music is that medium. Video games were a brand new media. We took a fundamentally passive device, the television, which has turned people into zombies on their couch, and we made it interactive. I felt it was a very important thing to do, and being a pioneer in something that new and that fresh was super exciting." ◆

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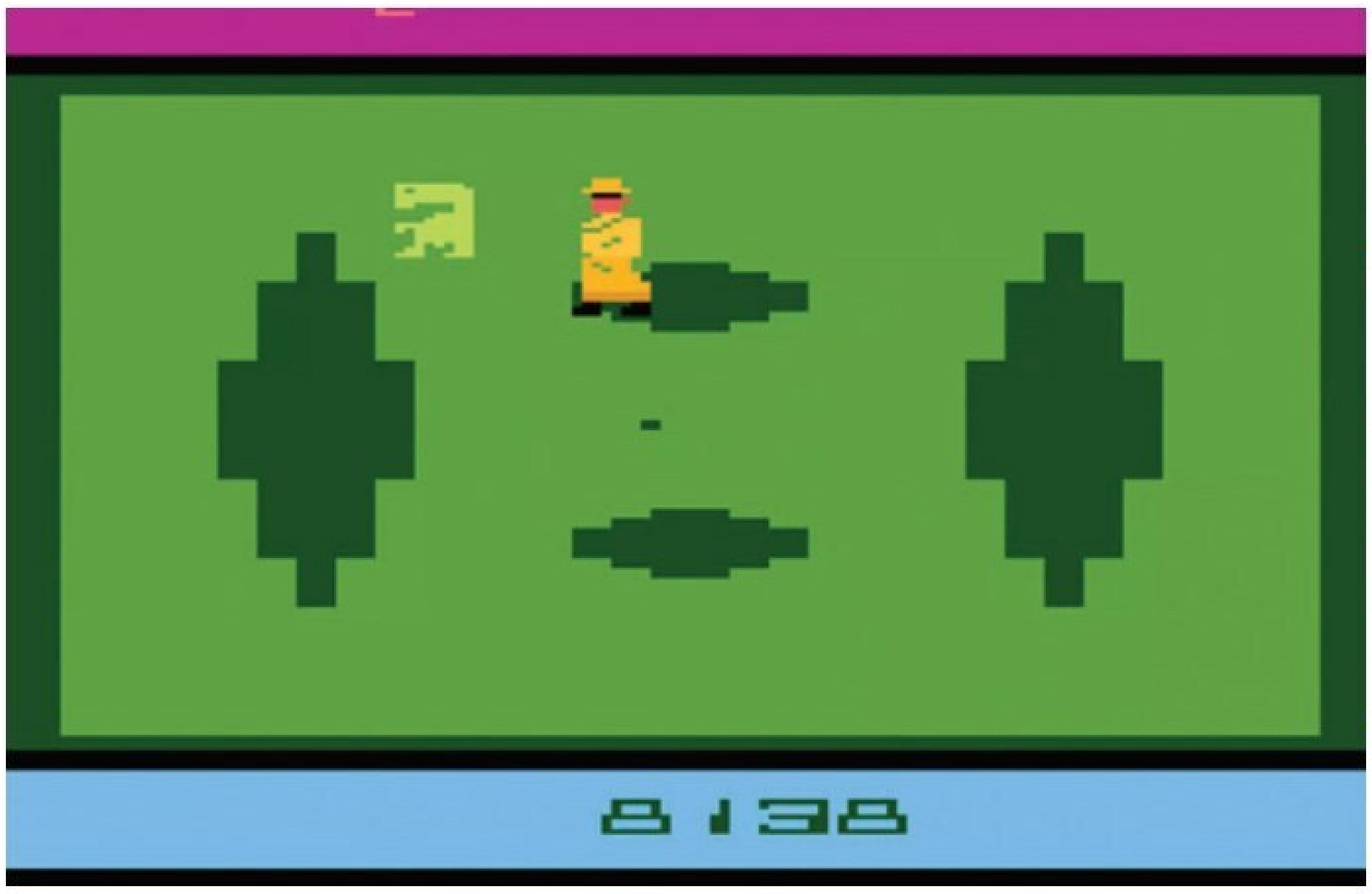

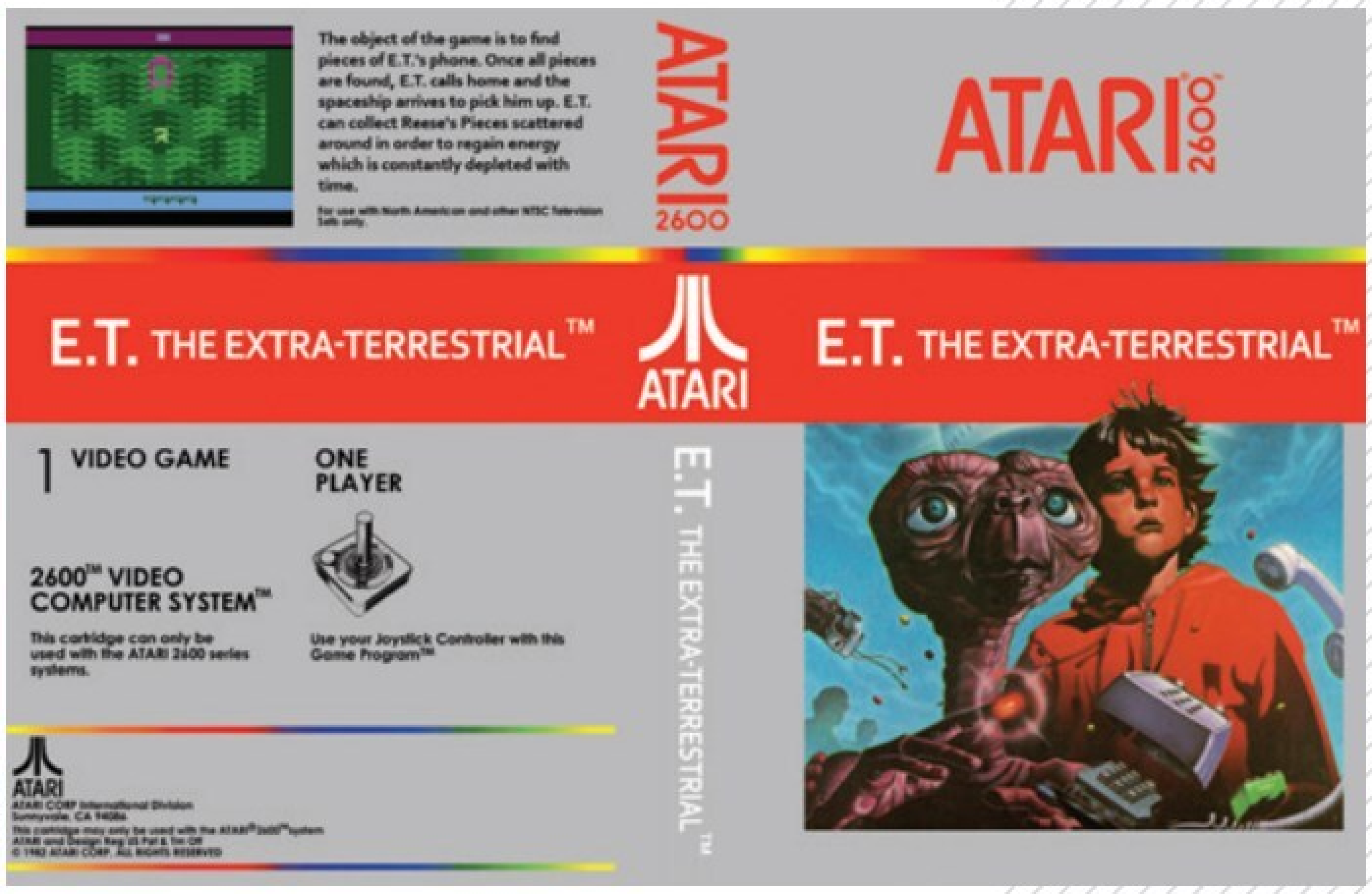
The object of the game is to find pieces of E.T.'s phone. Once all pieces are found, E.T. calls home and the spaceship arrives to pick him up. E.T. can collect Reese's Pieces scattered around in order to regain energy which is constantly depleted with time.
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Preserving The Present

Next-gen consoles will be out in a few months, which means some of you will be storing your existing hardware to make room. Before you do that, you may want to make sure that you're doing so safely. After all, what's the point of keeping it if it won't work when you want to revisit the old tech in a few years? With that in mind, we've got some best practices to keep in mind from a couple of experts: Andrew Borman, digital-games curator at the Strong National Museum of Play, and Kelsey Lewin, co-owner of Pink Gorilla Games in Seattle and co-director at the Video Game History Foundation. ***by Jeff Cork***

BEFORE YOU STORE

Before you start eyeballing boxes, make sure your console is ready to be put into storage. That means double-checking to see if you've updated all your games and firmware to the latest versions. And do something that may make your life easier in the years to come: "Before you unplug it maybe for a decade, make sure that the console is your primary console on your account, because they typically don't need an internet connection," Borman says.

BACK IT UP

"Once you have everything you possibly want on the console, set the console to offline and make sure that it works," Borman says. "If it doesn't work now, it clearly won't work in the future." Once that's taken care of, he says it's not a bad idea to back up your hard drive to the cloud, on a service like Google Drive.

CLEAN IT UP

Next, take a little time to make sure that your hardware is nice and clean. Use a damp cloth to get rid of any dust and grime that's accumulated over the years, saving a little rubbing alcohol for tough spots. "I often see people recommending to use a vacuum to clean out dust – don't do that, because the static electricity can actually harm the console," Borman says. You can use compressed air, but be aware which way it's blowing; pushing it further inside the hardware is obviously counter-productive.

POWER IT DOWN

Remove any batteries that you can, such as the AAs that power Xbox One controllers. PlayStation controllers are trickier, since they're not designed to be removed. Lithium Ion batteries may fail over time, which can cause damage to the hardware or even start fires. If you can, keep them separate from other electronics and in a place where you can check on them periodically.

WRAP IT UP

This hardware generation is nice, because there aren't many proprietary cables to worry about. Still, it's a good idea to keep the cables handy. Lewin recommends putting them in large, Ziploc-style sandwich bags, along with the controllers, so you can find them quickly. If you prefer keeping them loose, don't wrap them too tightly, since that can damage the wires. Use something like specialized ties or twine to keep them neat. "Over time, things like rubber bands and other plastic-based ties are going to react poorly to the plastics of the wiring and can melt onto them," Borman says.

PACK IT UP

"When it comes to boxing up the consoles themselves, toss any Styrofoam that you may have," Borman says. That material has a tendency to break down. Avoid packing peanuts, too, since they can cause static buildup. This generation of consoles was packed in cardboard, which he says is a solid solution. You may want to wrap them in anti-static bags first, just to be safe. To be doubly safe, he recommends putting that box inside another box.

PLACE IT SAFELY

"Most people just throw things in a box, and then it sits in a garage and it gets dust and bugs and heat and moisture. If you can prevent two of those, you're in good shape," Lewin says. Keep the boxes away from attics or basements, if you can avoid it. If you live in a particularly humid region, she suggests putting some packets of silica gel inside your boxes to absorb some of it. If you want to go further, Borman says you can find calculators online that will give you the exact amount of silica gel you should use based on your box's volume.

WHAT ABOUT THE GAMES?

Optimally, you'd separate your box art, discs, and cases, but neither Borman nor Lewin think that's especially realistic. "The more you can keep it like original, the better," Lewin says. "Obviously, things are going to be at their most valuable when they're still sealed, but I imagine most people are going to want to play their games and aren't buying them as investments. You shouldn't buy games as investments!"

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